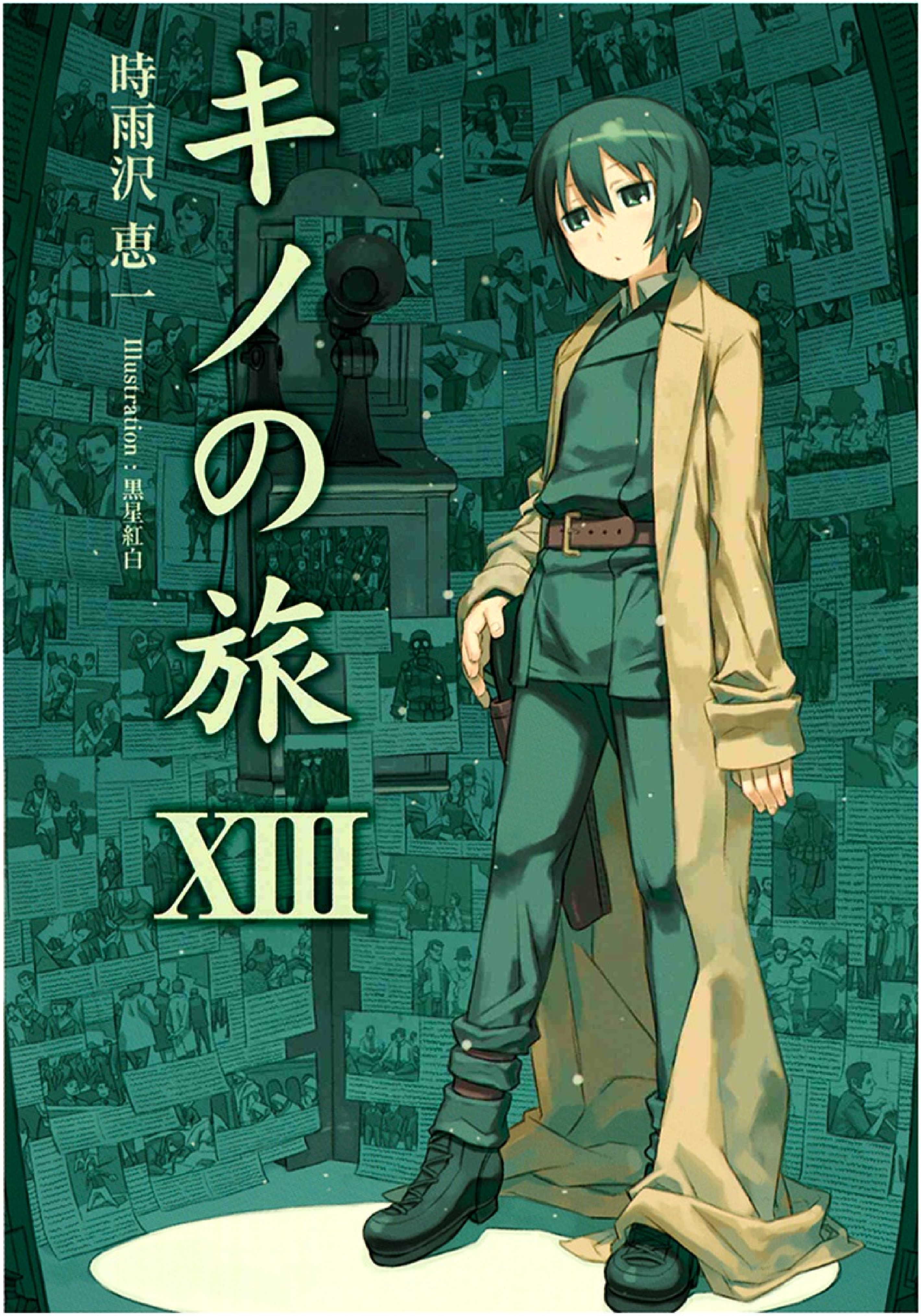
the Beautiful World

キノの旅 XIII

時雨沢恵一

Illustration：黒星紅白



電撃文庫

the Beautiful World

キノの旅

XIII

時雨沢恵一

Illustration：黒星紅白

電撃文庫

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Kino no Tabi - Volume 13 [Baka-Tsuki]

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Novel Illustrations

Novel Illustrations[edit]

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  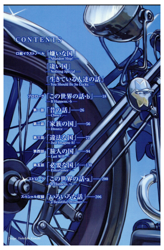

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  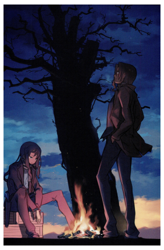

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  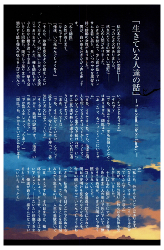

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  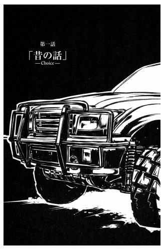
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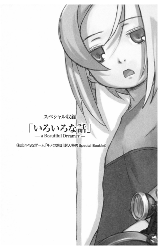
- 

スペシャル収録
「いろいろな話」
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（初出：PS2ゲーム「キノの旅Ⅱ」封入特典Special Booklet）

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-

今日は、黒星紅白です。
今回も楽しく挿絵
描かせて頂きました!!
ご愛読
ありがとうございます。
そんな想いを込めて
最高の笑顔の
ティーを描いたヨ。
KURO
2009/10/01

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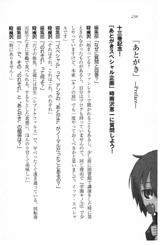
- 

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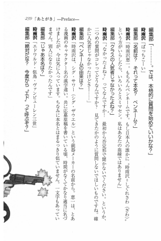
- 

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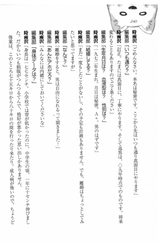
- 

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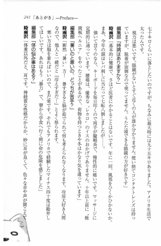
- 

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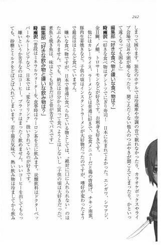
- 

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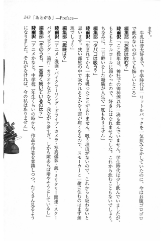
- 

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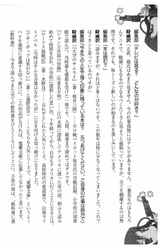
- 

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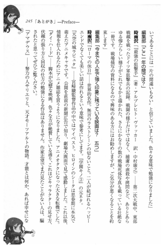
- 

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  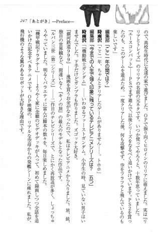

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  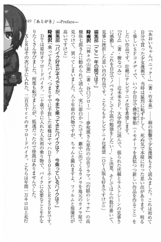

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  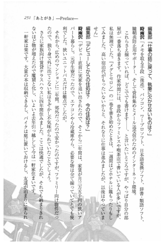

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  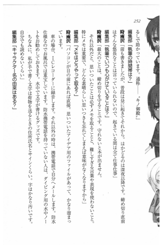

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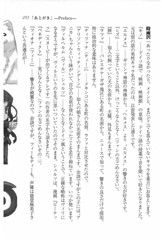
- 

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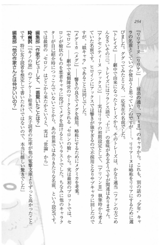
- 

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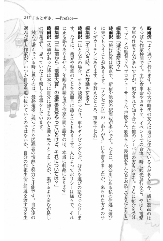
- 

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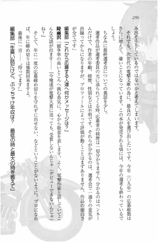
- 

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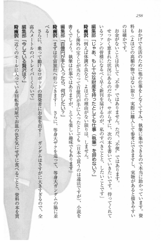
- 

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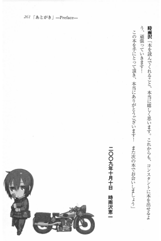

261「あとがき」—Preface—

時雨沢「本を読んでくれること、本当に嬉しく思います。これからも、コンスタントに本を出せるよう、頑張っていきます！

この本を手にとって頂き、本当にありがとうございます！　また次の本でお会いしましょう」

二〇〇九年十月十日　時雨沢恵一

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Prologue: A Tale of This World・b -It Happens.・b-

“A Tale of this World・b” —It Happens・b—[edit]

And Kino saw.

Over the horizon beyond the savannah, a billowing cloud of dust that was not there just moments before appeared.

Right before them, the sandy veil grew bigger and higher. Underneath it were numerous dark squirming shadows.

“What’s that?”

Kino readied ‘Flute’ and through its scope, peeked down at the horizon from the hill where she presently stood. After a while, she finally realized what was going on.

What brought forth the vast cloud of dust were huge animals in a flock enormous enough to bury the earth out of sight. These animals possessed big and bulky bodies supported by four robust legs—herbivores with an ashen hue.

“Those must be rhinoceros that inhabit this area. They’re likely in the middle of a mass migration in pursuit of water,” Hermes explained.

They couldn’t tell how many thousands or tens of thousands of the grey rhinoceros there were, only that they advanced over the earth with such force and close formation that their movement seemed like the flow of a muddy stream.

“Ah...,” Kino uttered, Flute still trained forward.

Up ahead the flock was a fawn stretched out on the ground with blood oozing from its leg, and a mother deer not far from its side.

“Hermes, if I rush there right this minute, will I reach that fawn on time?” Kino turned to Hermes and asked.

“If it’s just getting there, it’s definitely possible. However, there’s barely enough time to load the fawn on my carrier and return here. Just one slip and it’s over," Hermes answered immediately. The resonating noises from the ground became even louder.

"I won't do it," Kino decided.

"A wise move. It's better to stay here until that flock completely passes through."

As she listened to Hermes, Kino peeked through the scope once more. The mother deer, having realized that something was amiss, hurriedly ran away.

The fallen fawn raised its neck feebly and followed its fleeing mother with its eyes. The mother did not look back. It ran at full speed and soon disappeared from the scope's field of view.

The abandoned fawn desperately tried to stand up, but that only made its leg bleed even more. There was nothing it could do.

Before long, the flock came along with the loud rumble of the ground and the rising cloud of dust.

"..."

With Kino and Hermes bearing witness from the top of the hill—

"A magnificent view, isn't it?"

—the muddy stream continued its leftward course.

And mercilessly engulfed the trembling fawn. It vanished from sight.

It required a long time before the stream passed through and the blanket of dust lifted completely.

Kino sat with her feet thrown before her, waiting. With the ground's tremor felt through her feet and bottom, and the rumbling sounds reaching her ears, she waited.

When the flock has left, and the last sound and tremor has vanished, and when the wind has borne the dust away with it, and when at last, everything has settled down, Kino positioned Flute once again.

And within the scope's field—

"..."

—there was no longer a fawn on the place where it has fallen.

In its place were finely broken up pieces of meat scattered in a fairly wide area, indistinguishable from its original form.

“It has become ground meat. What now?” Hermes asked.

Kino carried Flute on her shoulders and stood up.

“I’ll do this.”

She took out the clay-like portable rations from the bag beside Hermes’ rear wheel.

Kino remained standing as she nibbled at her food, her eyes fixed on the ground.

Within a moment, vultures gathered and swept down upon the scene and started to eat the meat scattered on the ground.

More vultures circled lower to eat, and even more dove down to partake with the feast. They busied themselves with the meal, not allowing their ever-increasing comrades to take away their share.

“It’s awful. Really awful,” Kino muttered while she ate.

Upon which Hermes replied, “It always happens, Kino.”

“Hmm?”

“It always happens, in this world.”

“... You bet.”

Kino muttered as she struggled to eat her meal.

Frontispiece: A Detestable Land -Abandon Ship!-

“A Detestable Land” —Abandon Ship!—[edit]

Frontispiece
“A Detestable Land”
— Abandon Ship! —

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

My face makes me look like I’m always happy and smiling, but it doesn’t mean that I am. I was just born this way.

My master is Shizu. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and who has been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

Another fellow traveler is Ti, a quiet girl with a fondness for grenades, and who has become part of the team ever since she lost her homeland due to complex circumstances.

—

Once, we arrived at a certain country.

It was a country with a stable government system and good public order. Master Shizu applied to become its citizen.

The reply that came from the town hall gave permission to the child Ti (and to the dog, that is, me), but rejected Master Shizu’s request.

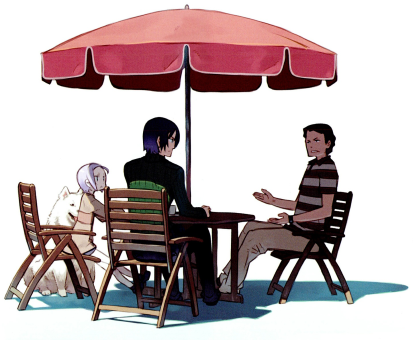
Master Shizu gave a momentary glance at Ti, who immediately hit him from below.

—

Without having any choice, we visited stores to shop for our travel necessities.

"Traveler, do you have time for a chat?"

A man called out to us. It was a citizen of the country, around the same age as Master Shizu. We took the opportunity to take a break in an open café.



Master Shizu ordered tea, while Ti opted for ice cream. The ice cream served to her was huge enough for three. Ti silently began devouring the mountain of dessert.

"You know, this is such a terrible country."

These were the first words out of the man's mouth. While Master Shizu listened obediently, the man continued to hurl insults to his own country one after another.

The government system is none the better. The law is too strict. The citizens lack aspiration. There are too many crimes. There's severe discrimination. The food is unappetizing. So on and so forth.

We have seen countries much worse than this one, but Master Shizu remained silent and patiently listened to the man's grievances.

"More," Ti said when she has finished her ice cream,

You still want more?

"You can eat more later, so that's enough for now, okay?" Master Shizu gently explained to Ti. And then he turned to the man, "I see. ——Well, if you detest this country that much, you can choose to abandon it, right? During my travels, I have seen a lot of people who do just that.”

“Hah!” The man shrugged his shoulders. “As if that’s possible. To regulate the population, voluntary emigration is not allowed in this country. The only exception is when there’s an equal number of people who immigrates, that is, replaces the number of people who would leave.” Then he added, “This system is the worst. It restrains the liberty of the citizens. What a foolish country.” After the man’s complaint, Master Shizu asked him with utmost seriousness.

“Then how about exchanging places with me?”

“That’s a good one, traveler!”

“I’m serious,” Master Shizu said, showing him the documents he received from the town hall. It was his immigration application, stamped with the words ‘DENIED’ on top.

“This girl’s application was already approved. And so I could become this country’s citizen, while you can leave it and go on traveling. As gratitude, I will give you my buggy and all my essential traveling equipment I could spare.”

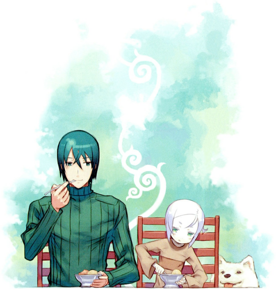
Without listening to the end, the man left a generous tip on the table, stood up from his seat, and walked away.

Master Shizu sighed and turned to Ti who was looking at him.

“Maybe I should try that too.”

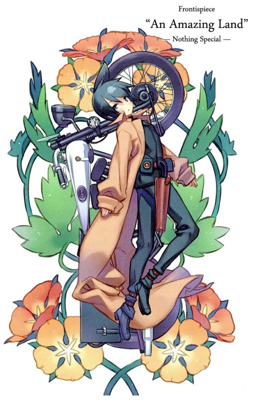
“You should. Right now.”

And so, Master Shizu ordered ice cream for two.



Frontispiece: An Amazing Land -Nothing Special-

“An Amazing Land” —Nothing Special—[edit]



“Picture on coffee?”

“It’s just as it says, Hermes. They draw pictures on top of coffee.”

“But how? Kino, please explain so that even a motorrad would understand.”

“Okay. First, coffee with very thick consistency is poured into a large cup. Then foam from steamed milk is poured in it. Depending on the way it is poured, various patterns can be created from the color of the coffee and milk. And after that, pictures can be drawn on top using a thin stick.”

“Oh… does the flavor change after that?”

“I don’t think the flavor improves at all. Nothing would change even if I try drawing a pattern on your tank, right, Hermes?”

“Except I would get slower because the painted part will get heavier. So, they do that sort of thing in the country we’re headed?”

“Yeah. I remember exactly what Master told me: ‘After seeing five waterfalls on both sides of a cliff by the north-south side, there will be a country with walls painted in yellow, brown and dark red.’”

“Well, I suppose that decides it. You won’t exactly find walls like that every day.”

“I’m really excited. According to Master’s story, it requires meticulous skill, so it must be something amazing. She said it was so pretty, it’s such a waste to drink it. She also told me that you can find it all over the country. She was sure it would sell high if she brought it to another country, but of course, she gave up on that idea.”

“Hmm. Well, show me when you drink it, Kino. I’m always interested in these things.”

“Sure.”

—

“Here you go, Miss Kino, Hermes. The entry procedures are done.”

“Thank you very much. By the way, may I know where I can drink coffee?”

“Just about everywhere. In our country, almost no one drinks tea.”

—

“Welcome! Oh? Those are some strange clothes and vehicle. From which district did you come from?”

“I’m a traveler. I entered the country just a while ago.”

“Hello!”

“Oh my… then welcome to our humble country. Shall I offer you our country’s specialties?”

“Thanks, but I’m still quite full. I would like to drink coffee.”

“I see. Then, shall you have one, or two perhaps?”

“For now, just one.”

“Miss, that’s mean.”

“Haha. Sorry. Just wait for a bit.”

"I'm looking forward to it."

"I wonder how it would turn out?"

—

"Thank you for waiting!"

"Eh?"

"Huh?"

"Surprised? In this country, it is typical to top the coffee with foamy milk."

"Uh…"

"Kino, there's no picture."

"Picture?"

"Yes. We heard some rumors that in this country, pictures are drawn on the surface of the coffee."

"…? Ah! Yes, I know! You're talking about *that*. Yes, you're not mistaken."

"I knew it."

"So it was true after all."

"But traveler, could it be that that story was from a long time ago?"

"Yes, that's right."

"It's a pretty old rumor."

"No one makes it nowadays. We only pour the milk normally like this."

"I see…"

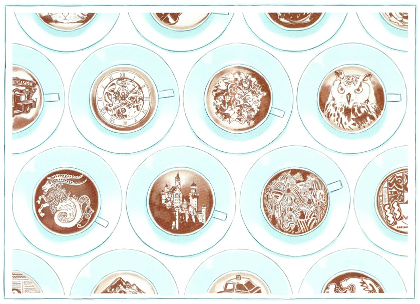
"That's too bad."

"Well, the flavour doesn't change anyway, so don't worry."

"Yes. ——By the way, I heard that a long time ago, everyone used to do it."

"That's right. I'm sure it used to be like that. Even when they only drink it at home.”

“I also heard that it was pretty amazing.”



“Yes. ——Ah, I can show you the pictures we had back then. It was a book on the history of this café…, wait a bit…. I’m sure it’s around here… Oh, there it is! Here, there are colored pictures!”

“T-this is amazing no matter how you look at it…”

“It’s really great. Who drew those ten zebras at the bottom right?”

“My grandmother told me that back when she was little, it was being taught at home and at school, so everyone learned how to do it.”

“That’s amazing. Everyone in the country must have skilful hands back then.”

“And even after developing the technique that far, the craft has completely died out?”

“Most likely. Like I said, no one prepares coffee like that anymore. I haven’t made one ever since I was born, and no one ever requested for it in the shop.”

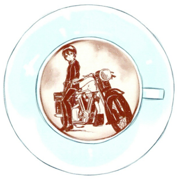
“It’s a bit disappointing, I wonder why they stopped making them?”

“Huh? That’s very simple.”

“What’s the reason?”

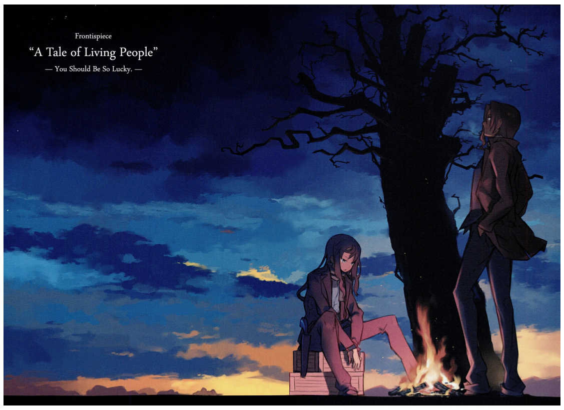
“Tell us, tell us!”

“If everyone can do it, then no one will praise you even if you can, right? And soon, everyone thought it was troublesome to even try. That’s all.”



Frontispiece: A Tale of Living People -You Should Be So Lucky.-

“A Tale of Living People” —You Should Be So Lucky.—[edit]


Frontispiece
“A Tale of Living People”
— You Should Be So Lucky. —

Amidst a desolate wasteland filled with dead trees——

Was a lone campfire.

Amidst a desolate wasteland filled with dead trees——

Were two human beings.

The campfire stood between a slightly short, but handsome young man and a youthful woman with beautiful long black hair.

The man spoke, breathing out a white puff of air.

“Hey, Master.”

The woman answered.

“What is it?”

“When do you think are we gonna die?”

“......”

“Come on, don’t look at me as if you’ve seen a strange animal. It’s not like I want to die. It’s just that… you and I have chosen to cross an extremely dangerous bridge. Using both hands was never enough no matter how many shootouts we encounter. And I couldn’t even count the number of times a bullet barely grazed the side of my head.”

"And so?"

"But, all this time, I have *never* been shot. How about you, Master?"

"If that's the case, I wouldn't be here talking to you."

"Well, that's right. But that only means that because we have killed countless people up to now, if we continue this kind of life, someday for sure, we will encounter the same fate as the people we have killed."

"I guess so."

"But so far, nothing of the sort has happened. We still travel, sit idly and relax in front of a campfire, just like now."

"That's true."

"Which brings me back to my question. 'When do you think are we gonna die?'"

"Then I shall answer. 'Who knows?'"

"So there are also things that you don't know, huh? Master."

"There are things that even *I* don't know."

"I see. Then…, do you think these guys know?"

The man said while gazing at the corpses scattered around them.

Over ten humans, who died still clutching knives in their hands, with expressions akin to chagrin being illuminated by the light of the campfire.

"Could these fellows have known this morning that they wouldn't be around to see the sun rise tomorrow?"

"I don't know. We could also die some place tomorrow. But you would be wasting your life if you worry about something like that every single day."

"Guess you're right. Let's just live our lives to the fullest until that time comes. You never know, that day may not be far off. ――By the way, can you imagine the two of us getting old?"

"No, not at all."

"Figures. ――Ah, when and where and in what manner would I die…?"

The man looked up at the sky. Beyond the arid atmosphere, millions upon millions of stars twinkled.

And then a faint smile crossed the man’s face.

“May the morning that holds the answer come.”

He wished upon the stars.

To You, A Hundred Years From Now

To You, A Hundred Years From Now[edit]

- This work is fictional, and does not refer to any specific people, countries, or organizations.
- This work does not aim to criticize or otherwise comment on these people, countries or organizations.
- The stories in this work are not attempts to predict events that will occur a hundred years into the future. Any parallels to similar events in the future are pure coincidence.
- The unlawful actions of the characters appearing in this work are not approved or endorsed by its publisher.
- Please do not attempt to imitate the activities described in this work. Murder is considered a crime with severe punishment in most countries. Driving a motorcycle, as well as mere possession of firearms may be considered illegal depending on the country.
- This work includes plenty of content that may be considered obscene, provocative, or violent. These are devices that are typically employed in fiction at the time of this book's publication (AD 2009).
- Please note that at the time of this work's publication, it is being marketed as a 'book' (pieces of paper printed with characters and pictures, then bound together).
- This book has 17 lines per page, and 42 characters per line. Reading it through a screen may feel out of place.
- The 'afterword' in this book is considered relatively problematic by the standards of the time of its publication.

AD 2009 October 10
Keiichi Sigsawa

Translator’s Notes[edit]

A Tale of Olden Days -Choice-

“A Tale of Olden Days” —Choice—[edit]

There were a vast number of people in a wintry land.

It was a desolate terrain with nothing but stones and craggy earth in sight. The extensive ripples of gently-sloping hills culminate into a valley, which though not deep, bars the view of distant lands.

Wispy clouds accompanied the noon sun with its feeble glow as it hung low in the sky. The temperature was also low, allowing chunks of ice to remain unmelted within the puddles of water that dotted the ground.

And in this kind of place were people, with bodies so thin, and wearing drab clothing despite the cold weather. There were many men among them, but there were also women. There were also children and elderly.

There were indeed a lot of people. Just from what could be seen, there were more than a thousand of them, all with emaciated bodies. Only their eyes gleamed brightly in search of something.

And every single one of them gripped crude weapons in their hands.

They were farming tools—sickles, hoes, bludgeons, kitchen knives, handmade arrows made from thin wood, and so on.

All of these objects could barely serve as weapons. But those who couldn’t wield them and women whose arms lacked strength held on to stones picked up from the ground.

They walked as one big mass while scattering their gazes around their surroundings, as if in search of something they lost in this barren land.

—

And there were souls who spied on this crowd with their binoculars.

A pair of humans peeked through their binoculars as they lay on top of a hill in a place hundreds of meters away, camouflaged by a sheet with the same color as the ground.

The circular field of view reflected the crowd of people in search of something with weapons in their hands. The dark mass that covered the ground was slowly but steadily heading towards their direction.

“They scoured this territory just as we thought. No matter how you look at it, they don’t seem to be in a mood to negotiate. If we get caught by them, we’ll be torn limb from limb.”

One of the humans spoke. It was the voice of a young man. His worry-free tone did not match the grave things he just said.

“Then there’s no need to hold back. Let’s go according to plan. I’ll leave the wheels to you.”

The other person replied. This time, it was a woman’s voice. Like the one before it, it also had a calm and detached tone.

“Right. —Let’s get to work.”

The pair got up from the sheet and slid down the hill’s slope with their boots.

The first was a slightly short and handsome man, dressed in a leather jacket and a .22-caliber automatic hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) hanging from his left hip.

The other was a beautiful woman with long, glossy black hair tied up behind her back. She wore a winter top coat, and a .44 large-caliber revolver adorned her right thigh. Goggles hung down from her neck.

The two headed down to the bottom of the valley, where a vehicle awaits.

It was a sparkling new four-by-four pick-up truck.

It had big tires attached to its long suspension and sturdy-looking iron pipe guards on its front. The driver’s compartment behind the vehicle’s hood can seat two people, and right behind it was a long platform bed. The light-green vehicle had not the tiniest scratch.

There was an object just about the size of a person on top of its platform. As it was currently covered with a sheet and secured with a rope, one could not tell what it was.

When the pair had gotten closer to the truck, a face suddenly peeked out from the open window of the left-hand passenger seat. The person who had been lying down in it rose up.

“What are you doing?! We don’t have time to relax!”

It was a middle-aged man who looked to be around his fifties. His portly frame was garbed in an expensive-looking business suit and wool coat, ill-fitted to his surroundings.

The man shouted, his face ridden with anxiety and impatience, “Hurry up! What are we gonna do if someone shows up in that nearby valley?!”

While settling down on the driver’s seat, the young man quickly spoke up, “It’s all right. Those guys aren’t carrying any firearms.”

Then he fastened his seat belt and advised the middle-aged man to do the same.

The middle-aged man also fastened his seat belt and started to turn the crank that shuts the glass pane of the window.

“Leave the windows open,” the man in the driver’s seat cautioned.

“B-but what if stones or arrows fly in?”

“The chance of those objects striking you is much lower compared to that of the glass getting hit. If it does, the glass will shatter and you’ll get injured. And it would be even worse if I get hit.”

“...”

The middle-aged man returned the window to its open position.

The young man installed a tiny wireless radio to his ear and stretched the microphone to the front of his mouth. He turned on the switch and started to communicate with the woman who climbed the truck’s platform at the back.

“Master, can you hear me?”

“I can.”

The wired voice reached the man’s ears, and because the engine hasn’t been started, the real voice coming from the back as well.

On top of the platform, the woman who was wearing the same device on her ear and goggles over her eyes was carefully untwining the rope that fixed the sheet behind the truck.

“Will it really be all right?!”

The man stuck out his face from the window and shouted.

“That’s what we’re hired for.”

The woman answered calmly as she removed the sheet with both hands.

——

Two days before.

The black-haired woman and the slightly short but handsome young man arrived to this country’s gates in their tiny, shabby vehicle.

As this country in the middle of a desolate wasteland held a vast territory, its circular walls seemingly stretched out straight towards both directions.

The pair of travelers requested entry for rest, sightseeing and replenishment of their supplies, but the immigration inspector and sentries asked them to turn back with downcast eyes, reasoning that they were too preoccupied with other matters.

When the two insisted inquiring about their circumstances, the immigration inspector reluctantly explained.

This country was under the rule of a dictator for many years, but its citizens were living in poverty, and its politicians were corrupt and acted out of self-interest.

At the same time, the gap in wealth between the ruling classes and the majority of the population was wide. It was only natural for dissatisfaction to take its root among the people and eventually bring forth unrest and uprisings.

Until that moment, the government suppressed them by force. However, even that has reached its limits. In the past few days, the citizens who have become part of the upheaval joined riotous attacks to the police stations and town halls.

The insurrections all over their wide territory were more than they could handle, and right now, their government was in the verge of collapse.

For the time being, people serving under the ruling class, including the inspectors and the sentries, were torn between escaping the country and joining forces with the masses.

They were not exceptional enough to be able to survive after throwing away their homeland, but they were not sure whether they would be accepted by the revolting masses. And the time for making this life and death decision was drawing near.

“And that’s how things are. Please don’t take it badly. If you value your life even a little, please stop insisting on entering this country.”

“Things are looking great. It seems like there’s a chance of making money here, Master.”

“It seems like it. Let’s go in.”

The pair of travelers readily ignored the inspector’s kind words and earnestly requested once more to enter the country.

“Which are you? Travelers... or looters?”

The appalled examiner gave up on his duty to decide, and called his superior to await instructions.

After a while, the inspector returned to the travelers with an exceedingly dubious expression.

“I have received orders from my superiors... If you are skilled, he would like to hire you for an assignment. It’s a dangerous job, but if you are interested, he would give you permission to enter the country.”

——

"I never thought it would be a job to help a politician escape."

The male traveler said as he twisted the truck's key and fired the engine into action. The brand-new truck's engine started without a hitch and its smooth exhaust noises reverberated.

"As expected, if you're running away, the earlier the better."

"Shut up! I'm not asking for your opinion! You only have to take me safely to the walls!"

These angry words were the response to the traveler's playful talk.

"I know, I know. That's our job after all," the traveler replied. Then he stepped on the clutch pedal with his left foot, and took the gear lever in his left hand.

"Shall we go then?!"

—

"There's a faint noise of an engine over there!"

"Okay! Let's check it out!"

These words were handed down from one insurgent to another, and the mass continued to move as a group and headed swiftly to the wide valley before them.

So as to make escape impossible, they scattered to the center and at both sides of the valley. The group at the front lines had the most strength—men armed with cleavers and axes.

"Once it comes out, stop the vehicle even if you have to cling to it! If we go at it all at once, we can knock it over! Don't let those bastards get away! Remember all those years of resentment! We can only be satisfied once they're torn into pieces!"

"Yeah! We'll beat them even if it kills us!"

Right after crying out these valiant words, the form of the truck appeared from the shadow of the valley, about three hundred meters in front of them. It was headed straight towards them.

“Here it comes!” “It’s them!” “Kill them!” “Don’t let them pass!” *Roaaar!*

Having found their game, they bounded while issuing mighty cries. All of them rushed forward without delay.

The truck that slowly began to accelerate, and the charging insurgents. Both sides are in the verge of clashing.

The truck was like a green speck to the black mass of rushing insurgents. The green speck looks like it would be engulfed by simultaneous attacks of the black mass from the bottom and from both sides of the valley.

But when the distance between them shortened to about two hundred meters, the truck stopped.

And then,

Pon, pon, pon, pon, pon, pon, pon, pon.

Consecutive noises like that of air escaping from somewhere echoed in the valley.

“W-what’s that sound?”

An insurgent who has broken off from the front lines tilted his head in bewilderment. And the moment he casually lifted his head, he noticed black objects flying towards their direction.

They looked like dots amidst the light blue sky. Lined up in a row, drawing loose parabolic trajectories and flying towards their direction. About one second later,

“Are those stones?”

The man has made a magnificently wrong guess, and the moment he cried out to his comrades to evade, the objects exploded.

The objects as big as fist-sized stones crashed into the ground at the insurgents’ feet one after another. At the same time, they exploded and scattered metal fragments with intense force.

Most of the fragments stuck to the ground and slightly dug up dust and soil, but the rest of them pierced through the humans around them.

Bobobobobobo-boom.

There were succeeding low explosions—

“Aaagh!” “Guh!” “Gaah!” “Ugh!”

—mixed with piercing human shrieks.

When the noises of the first round of explosions have vanished from the valley, and after the breeze has carried away the dust, the scenery revealed the corpses of tens of people, decorating the ground like a red flower that has just bloomed.

And then the screams of twice as many people echoed all around.

—

On top of the truck’s platform, the woman was seated on a tiny chair.

And enshrined right before her was the weapon that murdered numerous people but a few moments earlier.

At the center of the platform, sitting on a base welded from thick metal pipes, was a machine—a box and tube combined. It was around one meter in length.

Attached across the machine was a big box, which in turn was connected to a metal belt that carried ample amounts of 40mm grenades.

It was a rapid-fire grenade launcher—a machine capable of firing off grenades in quick succession. The grenades fastened to the belt were fed to the machine one after the other and fired in a fully automatic manner.

And atop the platform along with it was the tiny seat for its “gunner” and “battery” and the box for its ammunition. It was capable of rotating a full 360 degrees to fire at any direction.

“I see. That weapon is as rough as I imagined. I’m not a fan of flashy things, but it’s definitely the most suitable choice for this kind of situation. It’s well-made for a prototype. It would've been nice if they could mass produce it."

The traveler on the wheels said in a half-amazed and half-admiring tone.

"Ee..."

Meanwhile, the middle-aged man right next to him was stiff and agape from the added shock of witnessing this bloodbath on top of his nervousness in his risky attempt to escape. The air coming in from the wide open window was cold, but his face was drenched in sweat.

Seeing the man's profile, the traveler initiated a light-hearted chat.

"Come on, don't be that bothered."

"About what?" The man turned to the traveler.

"About the folks dying out there. No matter how many of them die, it's not like you would feel the slightest pain or prickle."

"Wha...! ..." The man was about to raise an objection, but his mouth did nothing but flap open and close.

The traveler continued, as if in admonition. "But I'm right, ain't I? Even if we hear the shrieks of humans with their bowels jutting out from two hundred meters away, do we feel our stomachs burning from pain? True, there are people out there crying out with their arms impaled by shrapnels, but do we feel an ounce of pain from our own? No one can understand the pain of another. Why, did you know how much pain the starving people suffered while you enriched yourself with bribes? Don't mind them."

"..."

"We'll do our jobs properly. To take you to the gates as planned, we won't hesitate to kill all of these people—these 'revolutionaries', these 'dissenters', or whatever you want to call them. You didn't hesitate to hire people—that is, us—to kill them, now did you? I understand perfectly how you feel. There's a high chance that soldiers and government workers would ally with the masses at a crucial moment, after all."

"..."

"Rest assured. Myself aside, the woman behind you is an expert."

Upon these words, the woman behind replied, “Quit the idle talk. It’s about time for them to move.”

“Ro-ger.”

The male traveler looked ahead and gazed at the faces of the people.

From two hundred meters away, he could discern the glares and fearless countenance of the people who had just witnessed their comrades get killed in cold blood.

Except for the people caring for the injured, everybody else tightened their grips on their weapons and started to move.

Using hand signals, they issued instructions to the crowd to not gather too closely and scatter wide enough to surround their enemy.

And their destination was a single point.

“H-hey...they’re not running away...”

The man in the center of that point finally managed to say a word. He was sweating as heavily as ever, and pointed at the people pressing near through the front glass of the vehicle.

“I-if we kill a lot of them at the beginning, they should realize our strength and turn tail and escape, right? Isn’t that how it’s supposed to play out?”

“Yeah, but it seems like they have quite the fighting spirit. From here on, no matter how many get killed, they won’t stop until you, that means us too, get bathed in blood. No matter what happens, they are determined not to let the old system return, it seems. What commendable will!”

“Eek—! Stop praising them and do something!”

“Of course. Master, shall we execute plan number two?”

The traveler replied first to the man, and then communicated with the woman behind via the wireless. Then, without waiting for an answer, he suddenly launched off the truck.

The four wheels slid in a moment, and the truck started to pick up speed on the frigid ground. It proceeded in every which way except backwards, and as there was nothing else but the furiously charging crowd, it plunged without mercy into the mass of people.

“W-what are you planning to do?! Are you planning to send us flying? But the car would be stopped even if we jump on only one perso... Ee! Eek!”

The middle-aged man screamed, visualizing his unsightly demise from thousands of arms clinging to the truck, struggling to beat him and tear him to pieces. The vibration from the ground was conducted to the vehicle’s interior and sent to him.

The truck proceeded straight forward. To the eyes of the man, the people out to kill him were closing in with unworldly speed. But in reality, those that approach—

Pon, pon, pon, pon, pon, pon.

—were greeted by grenades hovering over their heads.

The line of attack was almost level. The woman on the platform fired the grenades straight ahead, and the projectiles exploded one after the other right in front of the truck.

All humans in the vicinity were cut up to pieces by the fragments, or otherwise converted into a red mist from a coincidental direct hit.

If her aim missed by a hair’s breadth, a grenade might fall nearby and harm them, but the woman continued to fire without a care.

Moreover, the fired grenades fell accurately into locations far enough from each other so as to achieve the most effective damage.

In this manner, the truck created a red path from the cluster of humans that tried to surround it.

The grenades fired incessantly, and when it has finished turning the humans into a pulp, it has created a red road around twenty meters across.

“Just what you would expect from Master. Amazing job. I’ll have to do my best too—”

Without paying any mind to the chaos around him, the male traveler stepped even harder on the accelerator and plunged forward.

The four tires further mashed the strewn meat beneath it to pieces.

The pipe guard split the head of someone who only had his upper body left.

The vehicle’s frame sent flying a man who ran and tried to save his comrade several meters away.

The front wheels and the rear wheels shushed the groans of the fallen humans that got trampled underneath it.

The truck ran swiftly, itself transformed into a dangerous weapon. Thick lumps of blood decorated the windshield, and the mingled scent of blood and gunpowder wafted through the side windows.

“Eeek! Eeek! Eek!”

The middle-aged man raised plenty of unpleasant screams.

During that moment, a grenade that came flying blew up a man right before them. He died, fell, and was crushed beneath the wheels. The vibration from it was sent to the man’s bottoms.

“Aaaaaah!”

“There’s no need for you to be afraid. Everything’s going well.”

The traveler said as he drove. He said this while running over human bodies as if he was running over grass on a grass-covered plain.

His tranquil disposition was like that of a man driving a milk delivery truck.

As the group of people beside the advancing groups were not being hit by the grenades, they chased after the truck with all their might, but was no match to the vehicle’s speed.

The truck continued to run through the dark mass, creating a red road by itself.

Amidst the shaking of the vehicle,

“Eeeek... aaack...”

The middle-aged man’s shrieks, which now sounded like bawls, continued.

All along, the traveler continued to talk to the man beside him cheerfully.

“If you can, you should watch it. Right now, we are killing tens, no, hundreds of men all for your sake. Having someone kill another for your life is an unforgettable experience you know. Whoops—”

Something dropped on the truck’s hood with a thud. It was the head that flied high in the sky after its dismembered owner received a direct hit from one of the grenades.

The head, distorted from the impact, smashed when it fell on top of the car’s hood. As a result, its brains scattered and one of its eyeballs flied out, meeting the gaze of the man sitting on the passenger seat.

“E-eeeeeek!”

He gave a shriek as if he himself was shot, and soon fell quiet.

“Oh?”

The traveler glanced at his side and saw that the middle-aged man has fallen unconscious, his head hanging as if he was crestfallen.

“Finally calmed down. Sweet dreams.” Then he talked to the woman behind thru the wireless, “Master, I’ll shake the truck to the sides a bit.”

And then the man gave a sudden jolt to the steering wheel. From the force of turning sideways, the truck swayed and the head on top of the hood slid off, leaving only sticky clots of blood.

—

“Don’t let them escape! Kill those devils!”

“Kill them! Those bastards who treated us like insects!”

But no matter how much they screamed and chased—

There was no longer any means for them to stop the truck.

The truck proceeded straight across the crowd through all the splinters and blood and meat scattered about, like a drill.

It cut through the helpless humans at full speed and finally broke through.

Receiving screams and roars behind it, grenades fired in succession came out from the back of the truck.

These exploded not among the crowd, but farther ahead of them, rolling up a thick cloud of dust.

—

When the sun has greatly inclined to the west,

The truck arrived at the gates guarded by numerous sentries.

The blood that clung to the car’s frame dried up from the dust that enveloped it, painting a mysterious pattern on the brand-new truck. Dried chunks of meat also clung to its front and lower portions.

The traveler in the driver’s seat rested his elbows on the window frame while holding the steering wheel in a loose grip.

The female traveler sitting beside the platform who held the grenade launcher only inches from the edge, finally let it slip from her grasp.

The truck stopped.

“Boss! We have arrived!”

Like a taxi driver, the male traveler called out to the man in the passenger’s seat, who finally woke up.

“Boss! Are you all right?” The sentries rushed over and opened the door, shouting this.

“Ah...” The ‘boss’ looked around as if he didn’t know where he was, but eventually, “Yeah, I’m fine...,” he finally realized that he had arrived to a safe place. Then he quickly asked,

“My family? What happened to my wife and child?!”

A high-ranking sentry answered, “They’re safe! All went well for your family!

We have protected them and now they are on standby outside the gates. Please hurry!”

Upon hearing this, the middle-aged man hurriedly tried to get off the truck.

“I see. So the plan is to escape out of the country with all your riches together with your family and supporters and live a new life someplace, eh?” The traveler happily said to the middle-aged man, whose face still did not show any signs of relief. He slowly turned his face,

“...”

And gazed at the male traveler in silence.

But the one who spoke in his stead was the sentry. With a sharp tone, “Hey! We thank you for successfully breaking through the blockade and taking the boss here! The family also safely escaped because of the disguise! But that doesn’t give you the right to criticize and meddle with our actions!”

The man replied with his usual light tone, “Please don’t misunderstand. I wasn’t trying to pry or criticize you. In fact, I would like to commend you.”

“Commend?” the sentry asked.

“Yes. Once you’ve decided that your country is no longer good enough, escaping with your most prized possessions is not a bad thing at all. In fact it’s a wise thing to do. I know because I also escaped from my country.”

“I see... so you too...,” the middle-aged man finally said something to the male traveler.

“Well, life throws surprises. And it’ll continue to, as long as you’re alive.”

His eyes narrowed a little from these words. And then, “I thank you from the bottom of my heart for bringing me and my family here... To that woman in the back, as well.”

“You’re welcome.”

“If we meet again someday, I will welcome you with all my heart.”

“If fate wills it. Hey, ain’t your family waiting?”

The middle-aged man no longer said anything. He only nodded once, removed the seat belt and got off from the truck.

He met gazes with the woman standing beside the platform but said nothing, and walked away, protected by the sentries.

Without looking back, he passed through the tiny door in the walls, which couldn't be distinguished as one at first glance.

—

"Now, what are we going to do, Master?"

Two humans and a truck were left alone before the stretch of walls in the middle of the wasteland.

Apart from them, there was nobody else left. All of the guards also fled from the country. Only the scattered footprints were left on the ground.

The woman got off the truck's platform and sat on the passenger's seat. The man asked, "Shall we run along the walls and leave this country quietly without getting involved further in the conflict? If we sell that truck and weapon in the next country, we'll have enough earnings."

"No. We're going back."

"Going back? Where?"

"To that crowd before."

"Didn't we just break through? ——Why?"

"We'll hand over this truck."

The man's face was painted with disbelief when he heard the answer.

"But why?"

"Just a whim."

"... Well, I guess it's going to be troublesome to drive it to the next country. But even if we give it to them, they will still attack us."

"That depends on how the negotiation goes. We'll give them this truck in exchange for our safety. They have tasted the power of this thing, and in the current circumstances, they must want it badly."

"I guess that's true, but... what if the negotiation fails, and they try to take it back solely by force?"

"When that happens, all we need to do is to kill everyone."

"I see..."

The man considered for two seconds and immediately came to a decision.

"Let's do that then. I'll leave the negotiations to you."

*

"Then... what happened after that?"

Inside a lone log house in a forest, a girl asked.

The snow was falling quietly outside. The flames in the fireplace gave warmth and light to the room.

The old woman who was asked this question answered in a deliberate tone.

"After that, we handed the truck over to them. Of course at first they were furious, but through negotiations with their representative, their side came to understand that this was a better course of action. When we delivered it, we drove them over to the gates and escaped outside the moment it was handed over to them."

"Just as the student said, you could have sold it in another country, but why did you hand it over?"

The old woman answered, "That armed truck will increase the military force of the masses, allowing the conflict to end in a short amount of time. As a result, there should be fewer casualties, and the survivors can focus their efforts in building a new country."

"I see. —But because you left the country right away, you can't confirm if things really turned out that way."

"I guess you're right, but it's fine. I just thought it would be nice if it did happen."

"I wonder what happened? And did the politician and his family escape safely?"

"Who knows. Maybe, maybe not. It's not something that I can find out now. Most people don't witness the consequences of their actions."

"..."

"So, it's possible that the politician's family died in the middle of their harsh journey. Also, we can't be sure if the people who received the truck led their citizens well."

"Life is...painful, isn't it?"

"That's right, Kino."

"Master, do you think there is a place where everyone can live with smiles on their faces?"

"No. That's why at least..."

"At least...?"

"Smile whenever you can, even if it's just you."

*

"And this truck?"

"This is the armed truck mounted by the father of the revolution, our first president. This is the most important exhibit of our revolution's memorial hall."

The query of a young man wearing a green sweater and a sword by his waist was answered by a guide—a man wearing a business suit.

Behind the young man was a big white dog and a tiny girl with a sour expression.

The guide explained fluently:

When the powerless masses obtained this armed truck, their military might increase at once, and they were able to put an end to the revolution in a short time. The time and casualties spent was minimized and the reconstruction of the country went smoothly.

“As to the story of how this top secret weapon, which was only in development stage at that time by our munitions factory, came into the hands of the president, it is vital to learn of an account about ‘two travelers’. One day—”

After his lengthy explanation, the guide asked the young man,

“Traveler, do you know anything about those two? Even a rumor would do. It’s quite an old story, but have you heard anything about them?”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never heard it before.”

The young man answered with a shake of the head.

*

“And then...he escaped?”

“Yes. My grandfather ran away to this country, barely escaping with his life.”

The question of a young traveler wearing a black jacket and a revolver by her right thigh was answered by a woman in a business suit who looked to be in her thirties.

The motorrad parked beside the traveler commented, “He was an immigrant, but he was able to become a politician? And this country’s president, no less.”

“That’s right. I wasn’t able to meet my grandfather, but according to my mother, after they were accepted in this country, he worked himself to the bone and was eventually accepted as a politician, and devoted his life to the good of this country. She said it was his atonement for not being able to make his people happy in his home country, and an offering to the people who died at that time.

It was also gratitude for those two.”

“Oh, to those two travelers who risked their lives to let him escape?”

“...”

The woman asked the silent traveler,

“Traveler, do you know anything about those two? Even a rumor would do. It’s quite an old story, but have you heard anything about them?”

“I’m sorry but I’ve never heard it before.”

The traveler answered with a shake of the head.

And her lips formed a faint smile.

Land of Families -Divorce-

“Land of Families” —Divorce—[edit]

“Um... I’m sorry for the intrusion. Aren’t you the traveler who entered the borders yesterday? The one on a motorrad?”

“Yes, that’s definitely me. And this here is Hermes.”

“Howdy.”

“Kino and Hermes, is it? Welcome to our country. And sorry for interrupting you in the middle of your tea. But I have something that I need to ask an outsider no matter what... Would you mind it so much if we talk a bit here for a while?”

“Not at all. It’s also a joy for me to talk with locals. There are also things I would like to learn about this country.”

“Have a seat then! What do you want to know from Kino?”

“If you’ll excuse me... What I want to ask is about... ‘family’.”

“Family?”

“What about it?”

“I have always wondered ever since I heard the rumors...”

“Yes?” “Okay...”

“Is it true that out there, there’s no ‘family separation’?”

“Family... what?”

“Family separation.”

“What does this ‘family separation’ mean? It’s the first time I’ve heard of it.”

“Same here. What does it mean?”

“Well, generally speaking, through it, a family will no longer be a family.”

“No longer a family...?”

“I don’t get it at all.”

“T-then... it’s true after all... In other countries, there’s no such thing as family separation... Unbelievable... How dreadful...”

“Will you please explain?”

“That’s right. I don’t understand at all.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just surprised... Family separation is a system wherein a family can ‘stop’ being a family.”

“Stop being a family?”

“Still not clear.”

“Do you know of the term ‘divorce’?”

“Yes. It’s when two married individuals get legally separated.”

“That I know.”

“You can think of family separation as the family version of divorce. A group of individuals who have been living together as a family can legally dissolve their relations. If it only applies to families consisting of only a married couple, then it’s no different from divorce, but family separation also includes the cessation of the relationship between a parent and child.”

“Between parent and child?”

“How?”

“Well... when it becomes unbearable for them to live together, they separate.”

“Can you please explain that again?”

“For example, say we have a family here. A father, a mother, and two children.”

“Okay.” “Uh-huh.”

“If these four get along well and love each other, and if they can live under one roof with no trouble, then they could continue living as a family. The children will grow into adulthood and the parents will watch over them with joy.”

“Of course.” “That’s how it’s usually like.”

“But what if one of the children thought, ‘I don’t want to stay here anymore. I hate my father, my mother, and my sibling.'"

"Then?" "What will happen?"

"That child can file an application to the government. An application for family separation."

"And that application will be approved with little trouble?"

"Yes. The state will recognize the child's application for family separation, and will be taken away from the family. And the financial obligations of the parents will be waived. The family of four will now become a family of three."

"Okay..."

"Then how will the child provide for himself? He still couldn't earn his living, right?"

"That's true. That's why the government would give support to the child instead. Children like this, who grow up under an institution established by the government do exist, but there are very few of them.

"Why is that?"

"Because someone will come and pick a child because he looks smart, or something?"

"Hermes, it's not like they're pet cats or dogs..."

"Nope. That's usually the case."

"What?"

"I knew it!"

"Just as Hermes said, there are many such children who get taken into the family of other people who wanted to have children. All parents who have cleared the age and income conditions are free to see the personal information registered in the country's database. Those who wanted children can come to the institution to meet and discuss. Once they form an agreement with the other party, and decided that they would like to live together, the child can be taken in to a new family.

"Which means, that family will have him as their new child?"

“Yes. And that child will have new parents and a new home.”

“I see.”

“It’s just like an adoption, right? Are children the only ones who are entitled to family separation?”

“Of course not. Everybody can. That means the parents can also apply for it. Take the case of a father. He fell in love with a woman, got married, and had a child. But one day, he found that he no longer loved his wife, or his child, or both. In that case, he can file an application to relinquish his right as a father. He could live the rest of his life as a single, get married again, or if he so chooses, become the father of another father-less family that he had come into good terms with.”

“Then in this country, people can quit being a family any time?”

“Yes. At the same time, it means that anyone can start a new family any time.”

“Oh, just like changing jobs, huh?”

“It is very similar in the sense that you can go wherever the grass is greener. However, as far as the system is concerned, it can’t ‘drive out a person’. It takes the form of ‘a person going away’. For instance, in our sample family, the father can instead be despised by the other three members. In this case, the three members can file for family separation, and the mother can take charge of the two children, forming a father-less family. They can live the rest of their lives like that, but they’re also free to take in a new father. It should go without saying that the three members should like the new father.”

“Um... one more thing...”

“Yes?”

“What’s the reason for family separation?”

“Eh? You’re asking some strange questions. Why of, course, it’s because they don’t ‘love’ each other anymore. As a family, you are supposed to live under one roof. But if it were you, do you want to live together with a person you no longer love? Can you eat meals together? Can you sleep in a room next to that person? Can you share the toilet and the bath?”

“...No”

“Isn’t it? Living as a child of a father, or of a mother that you don’t love, and conversely, earning money, making meals, and taking care of a child that you don’t love, is a waste of your one and only life. And for that reason, this institutional system on family-building and separation that allows people to choose the person they love, and live together with love and affection, exists.”

“Okay...” “Right, right.”

“And this method prevents domestic violence and abuse. People can escape immediately if and when they receive abusive language and violence. Because we have this government institution, parents can’t be oppressive and say things like ‘Who do you think feeds you?!’ Children who don’t have any means to earn their living don’t have to become slaves. Children need not continue their lives running away from emotional and physical abuse. As a consequence, our taxes are very high because of the operating expenses of that institution, but everyone recognizes the convenience of this system and no discontent arose so far.”

“I see.”

“Uh, does this feeling of ‘not loving’ have to be mutual? Or can it be one-sided?”

“Of course it’s the latter! If they can’t apply for family separation just because the feeling is not mutual, then they will have to live with the person they hate forever! Living with a person who loves you, but whom you hate, is a very cruel situation! That’s torture. How is that different from slavery? Families should always have mutual love for each other.”

“Then in that case, what about the feelings of the family who will be left behind?”

“The method often used in this country is ‘giving the cold shoulder’. Everyone thinks it’s a sad thing, but they can’t help it. They give up when they realize that they will get rejected in the long run.”

“And just like that, they can be in a new family with another person they like.”

“Yes.”

“Then there must be cases when blood relations become irrelevant?”

“That’s correct. But in this country, there’s no one who cares about that. Of course, it is ideal if they are related by blood and love each other at the same time. But, a person can hate someone of the same blood. If the only reason why you would share the same roof with a person you hate is because you are ‘blood-related’, that’s coercion..., that’s torture! Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t deny that.” “I guess so.”

“After all, blood ties are but a biological thing. Compared to that, emotional ties win over. To begin with, couples who are bound together by marriage are not related by blood, right?”

“Well, that’s true.” “That makes sense.”

“Don’t you think it strange for humans to live their lives together with people whom they are connected by blood, but not by heart? When I heard that this system doesn’t exist in other countries, and when I confirmed it from you earlier, that’s what immediately came to mind. That means in other countries, there are many who are cruelly imprisoned in an environment called a ‘family’ without any means of escape, right? To be told off by parents you don’t love, to work yourself to the bone for children you don’t love... that’s abominable! Allowing divorce but not allowing family separation? Preposterous!”

“...”

“This country sure is nice for allowing it.”

“Y-yes...that’s true... I’m sorry for veering off topic. I’m happy to be able to live in this country from the bottom of my heart... I’m happy to have confirmed that, now.”

“If it doesn’t bother you, please tell me. Have you experienced this family separation?”

“Yeah, I’d like to know!”

“Yes. I’ve gone through it three times. There’s nothing taboo with talking about family separation, so I can tell you. The first time was when I was only five. My father became a drunkard after losing his job, so my mother, little sister, and

I applied for a family separation and started a new life. After that, when he has gotten over his alcoholism, he tried to reunite with my mother, but he was turned down. After that, it seems that he got accepted and started to live with a different family.”

“Okay.” “Uh-huh.”

“Several years later, my mother met a wonderful man and since we also like him, we started a new family. Our new father is a very respectable and good man, and he still is even now. The second time was when my younger sister filed for family separation against us when she turned sixteen. We were very shocked, but we can’t do anything about it. It seems that after that, she became the daughter of another family, and lives happily with them even now. The third time was just recently. My marriage did not go well, so I filed for family separation. Well, in that case, it’s just plain divorce.”

“I see. Thank you very much.”

“By the way, how many people apply for this family separation thing?”

“According to this year’s statistics, a third of the population have never experienced it. Well, children who have just been born are included in the count, so in reality, a huge majority must have experienced it at least once. In the town’s bulletin board, you could see posters saying things like, ‘Looking for a father! A person who values family over work. Preferably with glasses,’ or ‘Wanted: a grandmother between sixty to eighty years old. Will you be our grandmother? Tell us some tales about the olden days!’”

“Okay...” “Amazing!”

“I know! How about you try living in this country for a while? How about trying to be a child of someone? You can get pampered and learn about a lot of things. You can even go to school.”

“Thanks, but I’ll have to decline.”

“I see. Then what about you Hermes? There’s nothing in the provisions excluding motorrads, I think. As long as talks go well, you can be in any family! I’m sure motorrad fathers or sisters will be popular!”

“Really? But the thing I love the most is riding with Kino, so I’ll pass.”

"Is that so? Well, I guess that's fine too! I'll be going now. It was really nice talking to you."

"Same here." "Bye!"

—

"By the way, Hermes."

"What is it, Kino?"

"Can you please wake up a little earlier in the morning?"

"That's out of the question. By the way, Kino."

"What is it, Hermes?"

"Can you please be more careful in driving?"

"That would be difficult to do. By the way, can you do something about that sarcasm of yours from time to time?"

"That's too strict. If you service me properly, maybe I'll get better."

"In that case..."

"Same here..."

"It's about time we stop. I'm tired."

"I guess so. Even if we quarrel, we can't do much about it."

"Oh my! Traveler and motorrad! I only saw it in the news but it was true after all! Don't you want to live with me as my children? I can give you lots of delicious food to eat everyday, and you can request for high-end maintenance everyday!"

"..." "Oh dear."

"What do you think? You know, I look like this, but I'm actually a very rich company president! I can raise as many children as I want! Do you want to be my sixteenth and seventeenth children? I can give you the best house, food, and education, a life free from any hardship!"

“...Um.”

“You go ahead, Kino.”

“You first Hermes.”

“Then, shall we say it together?”

“Let’s do that then.”

“One, two...” “One, two...”

“I refuse.” “I’ll leave the decision to Kino.”

An Unlawful Land -Just Imagine It!-

“An Unlawful Land” —Just Imagine It!—[edit]

There was a road inside a forest.

Broadleaf trees were aimlessly scattered about, more than half of which made a boisterous display of autumn foliage of green, red, yellow and all colors in between. The forest floor was just as vibrant with the blanket of leaves spread over it.

The late autumn sky was high and clear, with only a few cirrocumulus clouds visible in it. The air was fairly chilly, as winter was beginning to show its presence.

This simple road was a single unbroken path, made by uprooting the plants and compacting the earth, but it was wide and had a solid surface. The road was even since the forest itself was situated on a level land.

The road stretched out straight ahead without any bends or curves.

And on this road, a truck with five trailer units was running at a leisurely pace.

It was a heavy-duty canopy truck with a long hood that seemed like a protruding nose, giving it quite a unique appearance.

A man in his prime gripped the steering wheel on its left-hand driver’s seat.

The roof on the passenger side was open, and a man holding a rifle-type persuader protruded his upper body from there to keep watch. He was wearing overalls and a warm-looking jacket with plenty of pockets.

The truck proceeded on the road with a rumble, with its five units separated from each other uniformly.

From the first up to the fourth truck, the canopy-covered platforms contained almost nothing. There was only a box of food and a tank of water, as well as a can of fuel in one corner.

The fifth one contained Hermes, tied firmly with a rope so that he wouldn’t fall over.

And two humans, seated on folding benches at both sides of the truck opposite each other.

One of them was a stern-faced man past his fifties, the leader of the units. He wore an exquisite leather jacket on top of his overalls.

The other one was Kino in her usual black jacket, with ‘Canon’ and ‘Woodsman’ hanging from her waist.

Also, ‘Flute’ was on her lap, placed in such a way so that it could be fired immediately once the safety is removed. There was also a bag containing spare magazines ready at her feet.

“We’ll arrive in the country in a while,” the leader said while looking at the forest from the back of the platform.

Hermes asked, “Mister, do you know how far we’ve gone just by looking at the forest?”

The leader answered with a laugh. “I know. That’s because I’ve passed through this road tens of times already. I have memorized how the trees looked like.”

“That’s amazing. It’s the way of a pro, huh?”

The leader shifted his gaze from Hermes to Kino,

“You’re a real help for accepting this escort job, Kino.”

“Don’t mention it. This also helps me save food and fuel,” Kino answered.

“It’s a bit boring for me though,” Hermes commented.

“I’m really looking forward to this country. I’m sure I’ll have lots of fun.”

“Hmm? In what way?” Hermes asked with interest.

“So you must be sleeping again during the explanation, Hermes,” Kino said.

The explanation served as the answer to the question.

“It’s a country with citizens that have amazing talent in literature, and as a result, it churns out a lot of masterpiece novels. The country’s literacy level is very high, and all of its citizens are readers. The country practically overflows with books. We go over there once a year to purchase books. We buy five truckloads of brand new and used books, and sell them to other countries.”

“Oh, books.”

Hermes answered, his tone can’t be any more indicative of boredom.

——

“W-what did you say?!”

The leader cried out.

They were in a plaza created from a clearing amidst the forest, just in front of the country’s gates. The five cars of the parked truck were neatly lined up, in front of which the leader, Kino, Hermes, as well as the country’s immigration officer, a lady in her thirties wearing a business suit, stood.

The officer displayed a momentary frown at the leader’s outburst, then answered in a business-like tone. “It’s just as I have mentioned earlier. Since we can’t let you buy books, it is pointless for you to enter the country. Well, if you need to refill fuel and food supplies, we can give you permission to enter only for that purpose. How is that?”

“But to say that we can no longer buy books… I have been in this business for more than twenty years already. Just what came about this year for something like this to happen?”

“As you don’t seem to be aware, I’ll explain it to you. —Four months ago, our country exercised an all-out regulation on works of literature that are ‘illegal’ in accordance to our laws. In short, it’s now against the law.”

Kino and Hermes quietly listened to the conversation of the leader and the officer.

“What’s that about? Kindly explain so that even an old guy like me can understand.”

“I see. Then let me explain it once more,” the officer said somewhat proudly, and continued, “For example, in your country, ‘murder’ and ‘theft’ are illegal deeds, I suppose?”

“Well of course. Is there even a country where murder is not illegal?”

“In one country Kino visi—”

“—visited, it’s not illegal,” Hermes tried to say, but was stopped when Kino hit his tank.

The officer continued. “Laws differ among lands, but just as in most countries, ours also have activities that are deemed illegal. The major ones are murder, arson, theft, rape, assault, battery, fraud, bribery, affray, illegal possession of weapons, and so on. Minor ones include underage drinking and smoking, indecent behavior, molestation, public disturbance, *etc.* Is this point still clear?”

“Yeah.”

“Then that makes things easier. —In our country, it is now illegal to write about all activities that are against the law in real life. Also from now on, the production, circulation, importation and sale of such books that are already in print are prohibited. As mere possession of these books is forbidden, everyone who owns them is to promptly surrender their copies.”

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

“…?”

The leader and Hermes mumbled while Kino knitted her brows together.

The officer continued the lecture-like explanation. “A simple example would be…a mystery novel.”

“Oh! This country’s mystery novels are quite popular! In particular, the *‘Bus Timetable Trick Series’* and *‘NEET Detective Series’* would sell well in any country,” the leader said.

“These books have also been very popular in our country for a long time. However, they are illegal from now on. That’s because in most mystery novels, a murder case would occur every time, and the murderer would be portrayed.”

“Well that’s obvious…”

“We cannot allow stuff like murder to be depicted in books.”

“Then, what happened to *‘No Escaping Heaven’s Punishment!’* —that thrilling action novel where the righteous protagonist deals with villains who cleverly escape the nets of justice?”

“Prohibited. To be exact, the part about ‘cleverly escaping’ is not considered illegal, but it’s a gray zone that leans more towards black. But more importantly, the main characters’ actions involve openly using methods such as peeping, coercion, stealing, and violence.”

“Then what about the story where a young man races on public roads with his mini cargo truck, *‘Less Brake More Speed’?”*

“Over-speeding, reckless driving, right-of-way violation, illegal remodeling, noise—, too many reasons.”

“What about the story about the shoplifter who underwent rehabilitation and eventually became a lawyer, *‘Objection! That Time’s Right Hand’?”*

“I also read it. It was a very moving story, but it is not allowed to write about shoplifting. This is only my opinion but, I don’t like the idea of calling such a deed ‘shoplifting’, which makes it sound lighter. It should be called ‘theft’.”

“Then what about the saga about the lives of mafia men and their families, *‘The Melancholy of a Godparent’?”*

“You should know the answer to that, right? Mafia activity in itself is illegal. There’s no need for an explanation.”

“Then what about novels based on real-life events? *‘Our Raid’*, whose motif was based on the incident where young men attacked a cash transport vehicle was popular wasn’t it?”

“Indeed, it was even referenced in our country’s middle school textbooks, but do you not realize that attacking a cash transport vehicle is illegal?”

“Then what about the fantasy world masterpiece, *‘The Magical Sword Epic’* series?”

“Just because it’s a fantasy world, it doesn’t mean that we can allow whatever was written in it. If we are to make such an exception, it will create loopholes in the law. If they are to write ‘This story is not set in the real world’ at the beginning, then they can write whatever they want.”

“So in the end, you’re saying it won’t do either.”

“Naturally. The scene of a monk suffering sexual abuse from a priest was out of the question. But other than that, the female friend of the main character makes a living pickpocketing, and the depiction of the lifestyle of the pirates during the pirate extermination episode wouldn’t pass either.”

“What of the historical masterpieces? For instance, *‘The Tale of a Certain Family’* that was written several hundreds of years ago in this country?”

“It is admittedly a masterpiece. However, it involved beating young girls, kidnapping children, adultery, murder fueled by jealousy, rape, and lots of other problematic scenes, so it was not approved.”

“Then even the modern-day masterpiece *‘Badudu’?”*

“It has been said a lot already, but this work is a universally accepted masterpiece.”

Kino who was listening to the officer asked Hermes in a small voice. “What does ‘universal’ mean?”

“It means it’s known far and wide.”

“Thanks,” Kino answered then turned her attention back to the officer.

“While it was praised as such, there was a scene where the main character got a young lady pregnant and abandoned the mother and the child upon claiming that it was a mistake. Would you consider the actions of the main character acceptable?”

“If you say so, but what about the erotic novels? This country’s erotica are very well-written and have such thrilling build-ups that they have become really popular. They’re for men and women alike.”

“Don’t worry. Erotic novels and other novels depicting sexual intercourse, by itself, are not prohibited.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“But there are several conditions.”

"… Like?"

"First, I believe there's no need to explain why acts not between men and women, coercion, and rape are not allowed. Moreover, intercourse involving parties below eighteen years of age are prohibited. The only things permissible are intercourse between lovers above eighteen years of age, or a married couple. For instance, even if the parties involved are in love with each other, acts involving fourteen-year-old girls and boys are prohibited. The only exception is when the woman is a married sixteen-year-old. Sixteen years is the age of consent in this country, you see. When writing an erotic novel, the time period the characters belong to should not be mentioned. The depiction of the sexual act shall always include the character's age before the name. For example, *"23-year-old A embraced 21-year-old B…"* Also, in the middle of the act, if any offensive words were used, even once, then it will be considered rape. There shall never be a moment where love will be diminished during the act."

When the officer finished her robotic explanation,

"…"

Hermes asked a question in place of the leader who turned mute with a grimace on his face.

"Then what about novels with righteous self-defense in them?"

"They won't do."

"Eh, why? Righteous self-defense and emergency escape are not against the law, you know."

"We know that, of course. However, if a character uses righteous self-defense in a novel, then that means that he will be able to kill someone right? In short, it will be allowing the portrayal of 'threat' and 'attempted murder'."

"Oh my."

At last free from the questions of the leader, Hermes and the silent Kino, the officer spoke, "Is everything clear? What we want you to understand is that we didn't outlaw every single book there is. Novels that did not show a single illegal act, those that include comrades with firm friendships, strong bonds between parents and their children, pure love between a man and a woman, flawless and peaceful human lives, a bright future free from worries—there are many novels that have these qualities, you know.”

“We know that. But see here…that stuff have very little thrill in them. They’re often extremely boring, so they wouldn’t sell. Anyhow, they would be things only fit for children.” The leader’s words sounded much like a complaint.

“That’s what I’m telling you from the start. It would be pointless even if you enter the country,” the officer declared with finality. “Moreover, our country is currently busy with the collection of illegal books. The publishing sector is in the middle of reorganization, and is not in any position to take care of foreign trade.”

The leader quickly asked the officer, “I forgot to ask the most important question! What’s the reason for this outrageous law? What is it for?”

The officer promptly replied, “That’s one strange question. It’s really very simple. It is to reduce the crimes in this country, even if only a little. People are being influenced by the crimes that they read about, and are encouraged to try them out themselves. It is to prevent something like that from happening. It is to protect this country’s public order, to make a cheerful society where people can live safely.”

“What? But aren’t those stuff only in the novels? Aren’t they all just make-believe?”

“That’s what makes it more dangerous! Because it’s ‘just a story’, the readers reach a conclusion that the acts portrayed in them are not illegal. They become numb from this poison. If they see a main character who is an assassin kill people stylishly and evade arrest, the reader will think, ‘Oh, killing people is cool!’ If they see a main character completing a heist magnificently, the reader would think, ‘Who cares if he took something that belongs to someone else!’”

“The only ones who would interpret it that way are children. If adults make sure that they are in places that can’t be reached by children, then everything will be fine.”

“If you acknowledge that these things can influence children, then you should accept the fact that they can influence adults as well. Unfortunately, most of the crimes in this world are committed by adults. You are an adult yourself, so you must understand right? ‘Because adults have already matured, they will never be influenced by anything and commit mistakes’—if such an illusion were true, then there will be no need for laws in the first place! Can’t you imagine it? There is no altering the fact that humans, be it children or adults, are imperfect beings!”

The officer then calmed her stormy breathing, and continued. “That was rude of me. Even in our country, there are people who are against this law. They gathered their voices and said this: ‘Even if there are people who are influenced and commit crimes, it is not the novels, but evil, to blame. Most people enjoy the novels as fiction, and would not confuse it with reality. And reading, regardless of what is written, makes life productive.’”

“Oho, and then?” the leader interjected happily.

“But interestingly, they were silenced when the ones in favor of the law said this: ‘Then if you became victims of a murder influenced by books, can you go back to life? Can you return the smiling faces of your bereaved family?’” the officer declared.

“…”

Having been overwhelmed, the leader fell silent.

“As they’re not capable of such a thing, the opposition had nothing to say. And so, to protect the irreplaceable lives of human beings, this law was passed. Owing to the imaginary world of novels, we have overlooked a lot of unlawful deeds up to now, but that savage era is now over! We will continue to grow each day! Now, how about getting permission to enter and get acquainted with our reformed country?” the officer asked.

Kino and Hermes waited without answering. The leader scratched his head, then asked, “So after four months, has the number of crimes in this country decreased even a bit?”

The officer quickly answered, “No. There was no change.”

The leader chuckled like a child, “Then it’s not too effective, huh?”

“No. You’re mistaken there.”

“Oh?”

"If we left things as it is, the effect of the illegal books on crime would definitely increase. During the four months, the fact that there was no increase or decrease in the crime rate can only mean that our law was effective."

"Okay…," the leader only muttered while looking at the officer who declared this with brimming confidence.

The leader took a long breath, and finally, "I have one last question."

"Sure, anything."

"What has become of the authors who wrote the outlawed books?"

"They have opposed the law desperately, as it was their means of livelihood. But such selfish desires cannot triumph over the safety of the people, and as the law pushed through, I believe they have already given up. There are also those who have picked up the pen and diverted their talents to writing lawful works."

"Are there any who left the country?"

"There may be, but the emigration bureau doesn't really know. You see, we don't question them one by one about their reasons for leaving."

"There must be a lot who committed suicide?"

"It seems that there are some who did, but again we don't know to what extent. In the first place, authors typically have noticeable eccentricities, so it's not really strange for them to kill themselves even before."

"Dear me…"

The leader looked at Kino once more, "Either way, it seems that the country I used to know has already vanished. I am really sorry, Kino."

"Don't worry. There are plenty of countries I have been to that transformed abruptly. And I'm not really that disappointed."

"I see. It's the way of a pro traveler, huh?" the leader said, and faced the officer. "It would be pointless for us to enter the country. We'll be—"

The leader stopped in the middle of his speech.

"Hey, what's that?"

What the leader pointed at was the neat row of mini dump trucks that appeared on top of the tall walls. The platforms tilted and started to drop some objects outside the country.

Those were numerous boxes that fell and crashed on the ground, their contents scattering. The contents were,

“You’re throwing away the books?”

Just as the leader said, those were numerous books packed inside cardboard boxes.

“Yes. Finally, we have finished the recovery operations, and have begun throwing away the books today. Incinerating the books inside the country would cause pollution, so we decided to just throw them away outside the country between the walls and the forest. As it’s not a good thing in terms of defense, we are throwing them away first, and when we have collected a substantial amount, the army is to dispose of the books with a bulldozer and—”

“Is there a law forbidding people from taking items that were thrown away from the country?”

“Eh? There’s none but…”

The leader grinned as he heard the answer, turned around and whistled. Then he made a fierce dash towards the books.

The ten men who had been resting near the trucks chased after their leader in confusion.

Kino turned to the officer, “If you’ll excuse us. We’ll also go and take a look.” So she said, and pushed Hermes towards the pile of books.

The inspector who was left by herself,

“Good grief… Will you tell me clearly whether you would come in or not?”

Let out a slight curse.

—

As Kino and Hermes approached,

“This is a mountain of treasure!” the leader was crying out in joy before the books.

There were books damaged from the impact of falling. However, with the books below acting as some sort of cushion, most of them remained intact.

Another pile of books fell down beside one pile. While taking care not to step on them,

“You guys! Load up the clean ones! Fill up the trucks as much as possible! Leave those in cardboard boxes as is! Collect all the books in a series as much as possible!”

The leader let fly authoritative instructions, and the ten men promptly got to work.

So that she wouldn’t get in their way, Kino stopped Hermes a bit ways off the mountain of books. Then she picked up a book that dropped nearby.

Its title was, *‘The Milk Delivery Serial Murders’*. And on top of its cover, there was a piece of paper with the following words written on it: *‘Contains a murder scene.’*

After showing it to Hermes, Kino picked up another book.

It was entitled, *‘Anika’s Adventures’*. The paper placed on top of it read, *‘There are scenes with a girl stealing a plane and some boys attacking people with guns.’*

“If Kino’s travels were a novel, it will definitely never be published in this country, huh,” Hermes gleefully remarked.

“That’s right, I guess,” Kino agreed.

The leader approached Kino, who handed him the two books.

“There’s no more need to pay for these books! We’ll make huge profit! However…we no longer have any business in this country. I have grown fond of it though…”

The leader said, half in joy and half in sadness. And then, “We’ll immediately retrieve the books and take them to our country. You can do what you want, Kino. I’m sorry we couldn’t be of help. Bye.” Leaving these words, he returned to work.

Kino first looked at the men who were proceeding with their work in earnest,

“…”

Then she looked back once at the officer who had been left alone and waiting.

“Now, what to do?” The moment Kino muttered this, she noticed a book by her feet.

It was one of the books that one of the book-collecting men have considered unnecessary, and had been thrown away. Kino took a few steps and picked it up.

The title was— *‘A Tale Predicting the Future To the Children of Tomorrow: Your Dreams will Definitely Come True’*

The paper on it read— *‘In a past scene, there were children being beat up, scolded, and have their beloved possessions taken by adults.’*”

“Just as the inspector told us earlier…”

“Hm? What are you talking about, Kino?”

“Didn’t that person say it? —‘Can’t you imagine it? There is no altering the fact that humans, be it children or adults, are imperfect beings!’”

Land of Travelers -Last Will-

“Land of Travelers” —Last Will—[edit]

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, shaggy white fur. My face makes me look as if I’m happy and smiling all the time, but it doesn’t mean that I am. I was just born this way.

Shizu is my master. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and has been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

Another fellow traveler is Ti, a quiet girl with a fondness for grenades, and who has become part of the team ever since she lost her homeland due to complex circumstances.

—

We were riding through a meadow during one summer.

Though I say summer, the temperature was as low as the region’s latitude and altitude was high.

Elsewhere, for instance in a warm and damp region that experiences the four seasons, the low temperature would be tolerable enough even if spring has only begun.

As the buggy was greatly exposed to the wind, Master Shizu wore his goggles over his eyes along with his usual jeans and sweaters.

Ti also wore the parka that she used against the cold or rain on top of her clothes.

Meanwhile, I settled between Ti’s thin legs, which were bare except for her short pants, and became a substitute leg warmer. At times, she would also rest her chin on top of my head.

As if rejoicing for the short summer, the meadow was overgrown with a thick blanket of flowers, among which rare alpine plants could also be seen. Both sides of the road was covered in green, and there was nothing but the blue sky and the green meadow until the end of the far-off horizon.

The lone road in the midst of it, though we knew not who made it and when, was stone-paved.

It was made of big stones laid out on the ground, and broad enough to let cars pass each other.

As the road was flat, the buggy rode through it with almost no shaking. But then, it’s possible that the suspension of the buggy, which was made to run on rugged wastelands, was just superior from the beginning.

The road was perfectly straight, but at times, it would take a detour around swamps and lakes. The waterfowl didn’t find the engine’s sound alarming, and would carry on with their leisurely swim on the water’s surface.

The buggy proceeded on the grey road in a relaxed pace, with neither rush nor panic. It was headed roughly to the southwest.

Master Shizu’s eyesight and driving skills were top-notch, but since this was a decent road, he felt no urge to hurry.

Besides, doing so would prevent the driver and its passengers from getting worn out, and protect the vehicle from getting damaged. But most importantly, it is to save fuel.

Any person who travels using a vehicle knows how much distance his limited fuel could cover, and at what speed he should run to optimize its consumption—it is a skill ingrained into his body.

Master Shizu had been driving since morning, asking Ti from time to time whether she felt cold or not.

And when it was almost noon, when it was about time for us to have a break and eat lunch, Master Shizu was the first to notice something.

“There’s a person. How rare.”

—

The traveler looked around, having noticed the noise of the buggy.

It was a man who looked around mid-thirties. He proceeded through the same road, towards the same direction as us. And what this man used to travel was his own two legs.

He was thin but muscular. His strong will was conveyed to us through the sharp glint in his eyes.

He wore rather threadbare green pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat on his head.

His tent, sleeping bag and all of his other belongings packed in a rucksack slung from his shoulders draped in a warm-looking leather coat.

A rifle-type persuader (Note: A gun) hung from the front of his body. It was a first-rate model; small, light-weight, fully automatic, and looked like something that can be used by the army.

At first the man looked at us dubiously, but he soon smiled and waved his hand. Perhaps it’s because he saw Ti in the passenger seat.

Master Shizu dropped the speed slowly and stopped the buggy beside the man.

“Hello there, travelers,” the man greeted us with a smile.

“Good day, traveler,” Master Shizu also returned a smile without showing any signs of hostility.

Then he invited the man to lunch.

—

The buggy was parked on the grass just beside the road, and three people and one dog, that is me, ate their lunch.

Master Shizu placed a pot on top of a stove and boiled some water. Then he put some dehydrated vegetables and meat inside, making a simple but warm stew. This and some tough, preserved bread was the menu for lunch.

The man eagerly and gratefully accepted Master Shizu's invitation.

Master Shizu and the man chatted while the meal was being leisurely prepared and eaten.

At first they exchanged the usual greetings. The man asked us to call him Cross. We don't know whether it was his real name or not, but that doesn't really pose a problem.

For a while, the two continued a safe conversation on topics like weather and the road ahead. But when the meal was about to be finished, Cross spoke his heart out.

It seems that Cross had been traveling around various countries with only his two feet for more than half a year already.

His home country is a place we haven't visited before. It seems that it was a small country with almost no relations with foreign lands.

Like us, his destination was the country waiting at the end of this road.

If his information was correct, it was not too far off. If he walked the distance, it would only take him a few days. Meanwhile, if we hurry, we would be able to reach it with the buggy by the end of the day.

Upon confirming that Master Shizu was not a resident of the country ahead of us, he told us his purpose.

"You see, I have to deliver a sad message in that country. That's the reason for my journey."

"What sort of message?" Master Shizu asked. Cross may have mentioned it because talking about it would make him feel more at ease.

"…"

Ti remained silent, and only stared at the two men with her emerald green eyes.

“I have to tell of a certain person’s death in that country. A traveler who originated from there has died in my homeland,” Cross said. “It was a man around my age. It seems that he set out on a journey to broaden his knowledge for the betterment of his country. Five years ago, he arrived at our country in a horse. However, at that time, our country was in a most unimaginable state of affairs.”

“Unimaginable?”

“An epidemic of unknown origin. Ten percent of the population contracted a disease. Having no resistance to this kind of sickness, people started dying one after another. To prevent infection, everyone’s activities were restricted, bringing our country’s functions to the verge of collapse.”

Right then, Cross looked up at the blue sky and took a long breath.

“He, who has come under the worst of circumstances, was like a god of salvation. He has acquired medical knowledge during his travels. He applied his expertise and worked himself to the bone to help complete strangers…”

After this, he stopped talking for a while. Master Shizu, Ti, and I patiently waited for Cross, who was doing his best not to cry.

“About one year later, the country was saved. Countless of people survived. I am one of them. However, his health was ruined from overwork. He contracted another disease, and succumbed to it, all the nursing given to him futile. He never lost hope up to the very end and continued to say, ‘I want to go back to the country where my family is. I want to return to my country sheltering a beautiful lake’…”

Again, he stopped talking for a long time. We waited.

“Our country decided to send a messenger to his home country. To tell of his death, and to return his hair and articles, and to convey of his heroic deeds. Along with utmost gratitude… However, that is not a simple thing for a country whose dwellers knew nothing about traveling. We have organized several traveling troupes, but because of lack of strength and inexperience, they all came back unsuccessfully. But they took back with them information about the paths they have taken…"

"And this time, you were chosen?"

"That's right. In the end, they decided that it would be better to just send one person, and selected one capable man from the army. This is a very honorable duty. When I accepted this mission, I was very proud and happy from the bottom of my heart."

"The journey was by no means easy, I presume."

"Well, yeah…" Cross returned a silent nod to Master Shizu's sympathetic words.

The problem of food and water, as well as attacking wild animals and thieves makes traveling very difficult. All the more for an inexperienced person.

However, using your own two feet is a reliable method of traveling.

For vehicles, fuel is a necessity. If your means of transportation breaks down and could no longer be repaired, that's the end. Moreover, a vehicle is typically limited to run on level places.

Animals like horses can cover even fairly bad roads. If you are in the plains, there is always food for it, but elsewhere, you have to carry fodder with you.

If you have the strength, and you take care of your health along the way, traveling on foot is by no means a reckless thing to do. It would take time, but a human can cover long distances even with his own two legs.

"But I have come this far. Just a bit more. Once I reach my destination, I will immediately look for his family, and I will tell them everything with these very own lips."

"I can't be of help—no—I am not supposed to help you with delivering that message…" Master Shizu started, looking straight at the ghastly expression showing itself on Cross' face. "But I can help you shorten the time it would take to arrive at your destination. That is, if you're willing to trust us."

In short, we're giving him a ride.

A buggy has only two seats. However, a person can be seated on top of the luggage at the rear end. Since I also need a place to ride in, Ti could temporarily stand there and hold on to the frame above the seat, and enjoy the breeze.

"…"

Cross looked back straight at Master Shizu's eyes in silence. He probably didn't expect to hitch a ride with our buggy.

He considered it for a while,

"Please."

Then bowed deeply along with this single word.

—

The buggy ran on the paved road.

I was on top of the luggage behind the seats,

"…"

Keeping an eye out for Ti, who glared at the scenery in front of her without minding the cold wind while I ensured that she wouldn't fall off. Just to be safe, a rope for use in mountain climbing was tied around her waist. But rather, the thought of falling off myself does not appeal to me.

Occupying the driver seat and passenger seat were Master Shizu and Cross, talking to each other to their hearts' content.

"You're one strange guy. —You don't seem to be a soldier like me, but you don't look like a person who couldn't fight, either. Also, even though you wander around like this, you don't seem to hate people."

"Lots of things have happened. I also want to be able to settle down in a country. Things aren't going too well, though."

"I see… Well, even in our country, immigration is not approved most of the time, except for very special cases. The same is true in the countries I visited during my travels."

"They're not very fond of strangers, you see."

“I am sure you know about this. It’s not like they hate you, but if even one person was allowed to immigrate, then they won’t be able to refuse the next person who asks. They will advance one after another. It’s not unlikely for the country to be taken over like this, so they have no choice but to take precautions. It’s the same with laws and territories.”

“I do know. Because I would like to live in a stable country like that.”

“A choice of two evils, eh? I wish that the day would come when you find a wonderful country you could lay your life for, a place where people live with the thought of helping each other deep in their hearts.”

“Thank you very much. By the way, what kind of travelers did you meet during your journey? Have you met a young traveler on a motorrad called Kino?”

“No… I remember each and every person I met, talked to, and killed…but I haven’t met anyone riding a motorrad. Is it an acquaintance of yours?”

“Yes. A person we owe our lives to. She looks like a girl in her mid-teens, but she’s very skilled with persuaders. A traveler much stronger and resolute than I am.”

“… I can’t imagine what kind of person it is at all.”

Cross said jokingly with a roll of his eyes, to which Master Shizu responded with merry laughter.

—

With a bit of a rush, we arrived at a place where walls could be seen above the horizon, just before the late summer sunset.

Master Shizu stopped the buggy as soon as he noticed a very tiny shadow in front of the horizon.

It was a wall with a slightly protruding facade and a distinctive tower. While confirming with tiny binoculars, Cross declared that it was, without a doubt, the country he was looking for.

"I arrived here at last…," he muttered with deep emotion.

"…"

Behind him, the ever quiet Ti on top of the luggage nibbled for some time at her dinner portable rations before finally wolfing it down.

It was decided that we will be camping out in this place for the night.

Even if we hurry now, the sun would set before we arrive. Most countries would never open their gates at night-time. Knowing that, Cross suppressed his excitement and readily agreed.

The buggy was parked a bit ways off the road, and the three put up their own tents. As it served as their beds each night, they were very skilled at it. They could probably assemble their tents even with their eyes closed. As usual, Ti's tent was right beside Master Shizu's.

To utilize the sunlight to the maximum, travelers go to bed early. As only a little energy is needed during the night, they eat only enough in the evening. They make do with a small amount of portable rations and tea.

When the three have disappeared into their tents, I stayed outside to keep watch.

It was a beautiful moonless, starry night.

I knew from their presence that the one who could not sleep to the end, was Cross.

—

A traveler's morning is early.

Most wake up along with the dawn to begin their activities.

Sleeping hours is long during the winter and short during the summer. As that was only natural for living things, this should not be too difficult for humans.

The sky was light, the atmosphere was wintry, and the meadows were damp.

"Morning, Riku." Master Shizu came out of the tent, breathing out white air.

"Hey." Followed by Ti.

"Good morning. It's a great morning isn't it? It's *literally* a good morning." And finally, Cross.

Master Shizu and Cross relaxed their bodies with light exercise. Then Master Shizu practiced his sword swings while Cross trained his persuader draw.

"…"

Ti observed them silently, and eventually, out of boredom perhaps, approached me at the top of the hood and began brushing my fur.

To my surprise, the full-body grooming I received was quite pleasant, but when she brushed my forehead and the brush hit my nose, I wanted her to stop.

After that, we ate breakfast to last us the whole day, and began riding when it was almost dawn.

Anyone aboard would notice how nervous Cross was.

He has stopped talking, and silently stared at the walls getting bigger in sight as the buggy approached his destination.

—

Early that morning, we were received by an immigration officer at the gates.

Master Shizu inquired about immigration, but just as we thought, immigration is not allowed unless it is of merit to the country.

And like usual, Master Shizu accepted and only asked permission to stay for about two days to rest and resupply. This one was immediately approved.

Meanwhile, without telling his circumstances, Cross asked permission to rest like we have, and was allowed to stay for a few days. Perhaps the reason why he did not reveal his true purpose was because he wanted to tell the family directly.

Upon passing through the gates, we came upon a vast territory that encompasses a lake.

There were fields and houses. The hazy outlines of buildings could be discerned from afar indicating the level of technology this country has developed. We can probably get our hands on some fuel for the buggy.

Enough about us. The problem now is Cross.

It appears that they came to know about the traveler's name, estimated location of his home, and other information about him before he passed away.

With utmost faith in this information, Cross scrutinized the map at the side of the gates. He found his destination—a town in the vicinity of the south side of the lake matches the name of the town he was looking for.

It was quite some distance away from where we were, almost at the other side of the entire country.

"Shall we go then?" Master Shizu said with a smile.

"Thank you. I will never forget your kindness."

And Cross climbed aboard the passenger seat once more.

—

A dirty, jam-packed buggy with a sour-looking girl sitting on top of the luggage will probably look strange in any country.

We stood out considerably even as we rode, and as soon as we arrived at the main street of the town we were looking for, we were completely surrounded by the excited residents.

We knew from their smiling faces that they bear no hostility towards us, but with this it would be a pain to move the buggy.

Ti looked somewhat delighted as she stared down at the people from her seat. But maybe it's only my imagination.

Soon an elderly man, apparently this town's mayor, noticed the clamor. At last we were able to move the buggy to the side of the town hall, and guards were asked to look out for the buggy so that no one would touch it.

Cross asked the mayor.

He told him their savior’s name and other distinguishing information that he knows of, and asked whether he could meet with this man’s family.

Of course, he refrained from revealing the details, including the fact that this man died overseas. He only told them that this man had taken care of him in his home country, and that he would like to express his gratitude to his family.

The mayor readily agreed and called for a man in the town hall.

The family he was searching for was readily found in the immigration records. Cross, who was prepared to meet some difficulties,

“I am…really grateful for that…”

Only muttered with a rather disappointed look on his face.

The mayor, on his own horse, guided us himself to the house. We followed after him in the buggy. Along the way, Master Shizu spoke to Cross, “I will say nothing.”

Cross’ face displayed some surprise, but quickly returned his gaze to the front in comprehension.

“Yeah, I know. I will tell everything.”

—

The place we were guided to was a lone house a bit ways off the town hall.

It was a simple wooden house, very much like most of the houses that could be seen in this area. A tiny log house, surrounded by big trees and green fields.

After getting off the buggy, it took Cross several seconds before he made his first step. We waited in silence.

In that house were an old couple in their seventies and a woman in her thirties.

They wore modest clothing like the rest of the citizens.

The mayor introduced Cross to the surprised family, saying that he was a foreigner who wanted to meet them.

We were all invited into the house with good cheer while the mayor went back to his work.

The old couple and the woman alike were kind and polite. It doesn’t seem to be a rich household, but they served tea and cakes, and did their best to welcome the travelers.

I paid attention to their self-introductions. The old couple was the traveler’s parents, while the woman was his wife. They have no children.

They sat opposite Master Shizu and Cross in a narrow table. As there were not enough chairs, I sat on the floor next to a wall, with Ti standing by my side.

Cross’ distress was transmitted to us, seeing that he could break into tears at any moment, but it’s not like we can say anything.

Cross spun his tale slowly, almost groaningly, as if he was trying to conjure courage somewhere deep inside him.

“Your son, this lady’s husband, came to our country five years ago—” Cross began with the facts.

That this man arrived while the country was in the worst of circumstances. That in the midst of an epidemic, he used the medical knowledge he had gained during his travels to save many lives, and that as a result, he was declared hero by the country.

And that he came here as his country’s representative to convey their utmost gratitude to that man’s family.

“Well, dear me! For that child to have done such a thing! And here I was, thinking that he was doing nothing but fool around in somebody else’s country!”

“Now, that’s a surprise! I thought a guy who refused to work on the fields and do nothing but travel would turn out to be just some outrageous vagabond! That brat of a son…”

“Oh? I did see how magnificent a man he is, though.”

Cross cast his gaze down and bit his lower lip upon hearing the words of the surprised old couple and the delighted wife.

Master Shizu and I both knew Cross' suffering. From here on, he would have to tell these people about their loved one's death. And to add to his anguish,

"Mr. Cross, thank you for telling us this wonderful news. You even took the trouble to come this far. Please lift your head. When he comes back, we will be sure to tell him about this."

"Why dear, if you praise that child he will get carried away and go traveling again. Let's make this our little secret, shall we?"

"I agree with Mother! Good grief, where could that man be loitering about at this moment?"

"Then let's keep it to ourselves… I would also like him to quit lazily wandering about, you see."

The family's cheerful words stabbed Cross one after another.

—

Master Shizu and I both knew.

And Cross, without a doubt, also knew.

There was one other option—to not tell the truth.

No one will know anyway, so everything will be all right even if Cross lies to them right now.

"After that, the hero that saved our country departed amidst tearful farewells."

That was all he had to say.

If he does, this happy family can continue their simple lives without grieving for their loss.

Of course, their son, this woman's husband, will never return to this house.

But perhaps, the hope that he would return someday would let this household keep its cheerfulness.

—

Master Shizu and I both knew.

And Cross, without a doubt, also knew.

That if he did this, he wouldn't be able to fulfil his mission.

Cross undertook this perilous and gruelling journey in order to convey the whole truth.

It was a mission given to Cross as a soldier. That is to say, it was a mission bestowed to him by his country and his people.

By abandoning this duty for his personal feelings, he would be betraying the expectations of many.

—

He knew that both roads entail suffering.

It will be his choice.

When I casually glanced at Ti standing beside me,

"…"

Ti was silent as usual, staring intently at the smiling faces of the family members at the other end of the table with her sour face. It is unknown to me whether that face carried emotion or not.

When I was about to gently chide her for staring too much, Ti spoke all of a sudden. She turned to the family and asked the unthinkable.

"When will that person go home?"

—

Master Shizu and Cross looked back at Ti.

Knowing how the two men should feel, they probably didn't wish to mention anything of the sort.

But those two, and myself for that matter, became completely taken aback with the mother's reply.

—

"He'll be back next month, white-haired missy."

Master Shizu and Cross looked back at the mother.

I couldn't see how their faces looked like, but it couldn't be anything normal.

"That's a relief," Ti said, satisfied with the answer. She then proceeded to hug my neck, placing her full weight on me. She's very heavy.

But that doesn't matter. Of more importance were the words that reached my ears.

"I-is that…decided already?" Cross' voice trembled even more, not surprisingly.

The mother answered with a smile. "Yes. He left with that promise. Once the short summer ends, this country will breeze through autumn and enter the winter season, after all."

"Uh…this may be rude of me but…when did you have such an arrangement with him?"

"The month before last."

"…"

"That time, he set out saying, 'This time, I'll be in the south for about three months.' He's an outrageous child, but if he has done a good deed in another country, then maybe we can approve of his behavior."

"…"

As Cross was already frozen in place, Master Shizu asked in his behalf. "Do you have a photo of his? It's only in case I meet him during my travels."

"Of course we have! It's our wedding picture though!" the wife happily said. She stood up, disappeared in one room, and soon came back.

And in her hands was a wooden picture frame.

The wife put in on top of the table for Master Shizu to see.

To have a look at the picture, Ti approached the table. I also craned my neck with all my might to have a peek.

Inside the picture frame was a colored photograph of a smiling couple.

One of them was a woman wearing a simple but pretty wedding dress, the woman seated right before Master Shizu.

The other person was a man around the same age wearing a tuxedo. He had shortly trimmed black hair. He was a bit shorter than the wife, and had a solid built.

"…"

No words came out from Cross' mouth.

But I have a fair idea of what he wanted to say from the movement of his lips.

Just one phrase: 'It's not him.'

"It's a nice picture. Thank you very much. If I meet him somewhere, I'll tell him that his family is doing well and is waiting for his return."

The family was overjoyed with Master Shizu's remark. Warm words resonated in the room. 'Please do so!' or 'Please tell him to go home earlier!'

But perhaps, none of these words reached Cross.

As they have already conveyed the message, Master Shizu stood up and politely expressed his thanks.

“Maybe it’s really a better idea not to tell him about this. It will be our fault if he leaves his family again on a journey,” he jested.

“We’ll do that,” the old couple agreed, and together with the wife, they escorted us to the porch.

We dragged Cross, now as lifeless as a ghost, and rode the buggy. Master Shizu started the engine and exchanged words of farewell with the family.

After being sent off with smiles, the buggy took off.

—

Inside the slowly-riding buggy on the forest road.

“W-what was that about…? Just what in the world…happened…?” Cross moaned, his head cradled in his hands,

“So it was not him after all?” Master Shizu asked, and Cross shook his head several times.

“It was not him! It’s clear as day! I have met that person countless of times! I remember—it was definitely someone else!” That person was much thinner and taller than I am, had long hair—”

Cross took out a pendant from his chest. Together with a piece of metal with his name, blood type, and identification number carved on it was a tiny cylinder that looked like a test tube.

Inside it was a short tuft of hair. It was light brown.

“…”

“We have no choice but to conclude that it was a different person.”

Cross did not say anything, but Master Shizu summed it up for him.

“But all of the information was correct! The location and features of the country, his full name, his home town, his family structure… Everything was correct! What’s this all about? Just what in the world happened?!” Cross violently shook his head. His mind was in the midst of confusion.

Master Shizu stopped the buggy in a beautiful location, where the lake was visible through the gaps between the forest trees. And then,

"Let's go to the town hall one more time. Then let's check if there were other people who set out from this country several years ago. It's only a guess though —"

—

We were surrounded by the residents in the same place as before, and once more received assistance from the mayor.

"How was it? It was a pretty interesting family, don't you think?" The mayor asked with a smile as he led us to the interior of the town hall.

"Yes. It is a wonderful family." Master Shizu returned a safe reply.

"That family was the richest in town, and their wayfaring son is a local celebrity, you see."

The mayor's reply got him interested, so he asked what he meant.

The mayor first led us to a drawing room, offered us seats and tea before he explained.

"You know, that son was an adventure writer. He would travel on occasion and use his experience and interesting encounters to write books. He had been doing that for over ten years now. His books became popular, and that family became very rich as a result. The truth is they could afford a huge building at the country center if they wanted to, but they disliked ostentatious things, so they decided to live a peaceful life in the countryside. Well I'm glad because they get to pay their taxes in this town."

"We didn't know about that."

"Why of course. They probably won't tell you such things because they're a humble bunch."

“Then that means…that man is so popular that there is no one in this country who doesn’t know his name?”

“Yeah. For some time, there would be no end to young people who sought to become an adventure writer like him. It has become a social issue at one point. In reality, a strong body and a tenacious spirit is necessary for someone to survive outside the walls, so the country typically denied people permission to go out of the country. But if it’s him, he can survive.”

Hearing this much, Master Shizu, Cross, and I have our suspicions confirmed.

Someone from this country arrived in Cross’ country and used a false name. That would explain everything.

“There is some other matter that I would like to talk about,” Master Shizu began.

“Around five years ago, I met a traveler who came from this country. I would like to know about this person, so could you please tell me what you know about him? I don’t know his name, I only remember his appearance.”

This can be thought of as a difficult task for good reason, but the people from the town hall accepted it with smiles.

“Even though many traders come in, there are not many who leave the country. I believe we’ll be able to give you the information that you want immediately. How does this person look like?”

Master Shizu told them the description of the hero that Cross had given.

Thin and tall, with long brown hair. Master Shizu had only said this much when,

“No way!”

The mayor stood up with a shout.

“Mr. Shizu! That man…did he do you any harm?” Master Shizu, Cross, and I were surprised with the violent expression in the mayor’s face.

“…”

Only Ti remained impassive, gazing at the mayor’s wrinkled face.

“Harm? No.”

Master Shizu lied, though it’s not something he’s very good at. “I met that person in the middle of the wilderness. Being travelers, we get lonely at times. So we had the usual conversation and information exchange, then parted ways.”

“If it’s just that, then it’s fine…”

The mayor returned to his seat, and Cross fixed his eyes at him.

“Um, if you’ll excuse my rudeness, may I know who—no, may I know what kind of person you’re talking about? It seems that you know him well, Mayor…”

“Well, I’m not sure if it’s a good idea…”

The mayor’s distress was transmitted to us, seeing that beads of sweat began trickling down his face, but it’s not like we have to stop asking.

“I will be returning to my homeland, and I may be able to meet this person along the way,” Cross commented.

“I-if that’s the case, then please don’t let down your guard if you meet him! Don’t accept any food or drink he offers you! And never show him your back!”

“How come? I couldn’t be cautious without knowing the reason.”

The mayor spoke, finally yielding to Cross’ shrewdness, “Please don’t tell this to anyone outside the country… It’s our country’s secret…”

“I swear by my honor. Then, who is this person?”

The answer Cross’ sought for came from the mouth of the person before us.

“He’s a former death convict.”

“… What…did you say?”

“He was a death convict. That man’s name was—no, even the mention of his name is revolting. Let’s just call him ‘Death Convict 13’. Seven years ago, Death Convict 13 perpetrated a terrorist bombing. At that time, he lived in the city as a medical student. However, he couldn’t find a job due to his poor academic performance. This made him ireful. He blamed his failure on society, and vented his frustration through a bombing.”

“…”

“He made a bomb using agricultural chemicals. In just a moment, twenty-three people died, and five times that number was injured… Something like that should guarantee one a death penalty. However…”

“He was…pardoned?”

“Indeed. Because of change in leadership, he was given an amnesty and his punishment was reduced to permanent exile.”

“And then, outside the country…”

The mayor did not understand the meaning of Cross’ words.

He panicked, thinking that we would misunderstand and reproach them for letting such a man roam the world freely.

“B-but, at least you must understand this! At that time, banishment is no different from a death penalty! We didn’t allow him to have any decent equipment, and we threw him out there in the middle of the short autumn season! This is an entirely different case from the adventure writer, who sets out with perfect equipment and a seamless schedule. We all believed he died by the roadside or fell prey to some wild beast… We didn’t think…he would survive… That worthless person…”

“That was already five years ago. Who knows what has become of him?” Master Shizu said.

“P-please understand… Even if he comes back, he wouldn’t be able to enter this country… Ah no, I have strayed from discussion, please excuse me.”

When he has regained his composure, the mayor spoke to us almost threateningly, “Please don’t mention any of this inside the country. If they find out that there’s a possibility of him being alive, they wouldn’t hesitate to organize a punitive force.”

“Understood. We will not say a word about him in this country.”

It was Cross, and not Master Shizu, who spoke so resolutely. The mayor let out a sigh of relief.

Master Shizu silently narrowed his eyes.

“…”

Still silent, Ti looked at Cross.

Cross casually asked the mayor with a tone as normal as he could muster. “How is this man’s family doing now?”

“Eh? Oh…they’re no longer around.”

“What happened?”

“He had parents and siblings. But no matter where they went, their identities would be revealed and they would get resented as a result. Eventually, they got tired of this treatment, and decided to end it all one day by setting fire to their house. There were also rumors that the families of the bombing victims were the ones who started the fire as vengeance, but there’s no way of knowing the truth anymore.”

“… I see.” Cross’ terrifyingly calm voice was heard.

“Thank you for sharing us this story.”

Master Shizu faced the mayor, promised once more to keep everything a secret, and stood up from his chair.

“Thank you, Mayor.”

Likewise Cross expressed his thanks and slowly stood up.

—

It was already past noon.

We went aboard the buggy and set out with a grand farewell from the residents. We rode for a while with nobody saying a word, and eventually, when we’re out of earshot, Master Shizu stopped the buggy by the lakeside.

Reflecting the sky, the surface of the lake shone blue.

Cross alighted from the buggy’s passenger seat and took down his luggage. Then he walked to the driver’s side and offered his hand to Master Shizu.

“Thank you. I will never forget you for the rest of my life. Let’s part ways here. I will soon leave this country and return home."

Master Shizu gripped the hand firmly,

"Take care." Uttering only this one phrase. I said the same thing, and lastly, Ti turned her emerald green eyes to Cross. And then,

"It's okay."

Cross smiled gently upon hearing Ti's words.

Then he turned around, faced the lake, and took out the pendant from his chest.

He removed only the cylinder from the chain, and without the slightest hesitation, threw it into the lake with all his strength.

At the same time, Master Shizu launched the buggy.

Ti and I looked back.

We watched as the back of the man who stood at the banks of the lake, his figure stretched in a salute, got smaller and smaller.

—

After running for a while, Master Shizu stopped the buggy.

"Ti, you can get in the passenger seat now," he called out to Ti, who was being beaten by the wind on top of the luggage at the back.

I settled myself in front of the vacated seat,

"…"

And Ti slipped off from the top of the luggage. There was no change in her expression, but judging from her behavior, she was rather reluctant to do so.

"How were you able to tell it was a different traveler, Ti?" Master Shizu asked before starting the buggy.

"Why can't you tell?" Ti answered.

“Ah, well…”

As Master Shizu was stuck for answer, Ti continued. “Not gloomy.”

“Huh?”

“Those people… aren’t gloomy. You know if you look at them.”

It was very rare of Ti to speak a lot. But just when I thought her answer would stop there, to my surprise, Ti continued talking.

“Someone who had been waiting five years for their loved one to return can’t be that cheerful. Why can’t you tell?”

“Now that I think about it, that’s true. It’s just as you say, Ti,” Master Shizu sincerely admitted his defeat. “Cross and I completely believed in prior information. We didn’t even consider the possibility that it could have been a complete stranger. This served as a lesson,” he said with a smile.

“…”

Still silent, Ti looked up at Master Shizu’s face. “What next?”

Master Shizu shrugged lightly. “Well, since this this country’s no good either, we’ve got to go to the next one. —Ti, what kind of country would be nice?”

“…”

As Ti did not answer, Master Shizu started the buggy.

And as the buggy accelerated, Ti’s voice was heard.

“Anywhere’s fine as long as we’re together.”

Land of Necessity -Entertainer-

“Land of Necessity” — Entertainer —[edit]

A motorrad (Note: a two-wheeled vehicle; only denotes that it cannot fly) was running on a prairie in the midst of a brilliant spring.

An immediate view of the surroundings reveals a string of green hills with the vivid green of young leaves covering the incessant land like a carpet.

The scenery was occupied mostly by the beautifully clear sky, with the morning sun radiating upon everything.

Several balls of clouds resembling silk floss floated neither too low nor too high in the sky. A gentle wind blew from time to time, sending a ripple throughout the prairie.

Nothing was spared from the greenery, not even the surface of the dirt road, which was in the process of turning into a light verdant shade from its dull brown. However, the sturdy blades of grass were soon run over without mercy by the wheels of the passing motorrad.

On both sides of the motorrad’s rear wheel were two boxes, on top of which was tied a satchel and a sleeping bag. It ran through the westward route with a speed neither fast nor slow.

“I was just thinking of practicing my shooting…,” the rider of the motorrad muttered.

The rider was young, around mid-teens, with big eyes and a fearless expression.

She wore a brimmed hat with flaps that covered her ears, and silver-framed goggles on her eyes. She wore a black jacket fastened at the waist with a wide belt.

Several pouches lined the belt, and hanging from it over at her right thigh was a holster with a hand persuader (Note: a persuader is a gun, in this case a pistol), in particular a large-caliber revolver, inside. Also, a slim automatic was installed sideways at the back of her waist.

“There’s no tree you can use to hang the target. Maybe you should pass for today, Kino.”

The motorrad replied from below. True enough, though the blades of grass must number up to hundreds of millions, there was not a single tree in sight.

The rider called Kino answered as she trampled on the grass with the motorrad.

“I can’t do that. Constant practice is very important.”

“Even though you’re already so good?”

“You’ll get rusty in no time if you laze around, so you should exercise and practice every day even for a while. That’s what Master used to say. I’m sure you know it too Hermes. When I haven’t driven for a while, you tell me how much I’ve gotten bad, right?”

The motorrad called Hermes agreed, then added, “I understand that it is necessary. But there’s not much you can do when the essential requirement called a tree does not exist anywhere.”

“You’re right,” Kino replied.

“That’s why the only way out of your problem is to give up for today and rush ahead, Kino.”

“Yeah—no wait, I still have the option to hang the target from your handlebars.”

“I have complete confidence in your skills, Kino. But if by a one in a million chance, you miss and hit me, what are you going to do?”

“Exactly the reason why I have to practice—so that never happens.”

“Why do I feel like that doesn’t answer my question?”

“Well anyway, I hope we find a tree.”

“It would be great if we see one.”

The conversation died down after a while as Kino and Hermes continued to run through the prairie.

And when they arrived at the top of the hill concealing the view ahead,

"Ah!" "Ah!"

Kino and Hermes exclaimed at the same time.

At the bottom of the gentle slope, amidst the level prairie, was without a doubt, a tree.

It stood in solitude amidst the prairie, with its branches spread out sideways.

—

Kino fired.

Along with the roar, the barrel of the revolver 'Canon', which she held in her right hand, bounded upwards. The characteristic white smoke of the liquid propellant unfurled in an instant, and soon vanished.

The .44 caliber round cleared the roughly twenty-meter distance in no time.

It hit the iron plate that was hung from the tree's branch with a thin rope. Sparks flew, and a neither low nor high-pitched sound echoed. The second bullet fired in succession hit just beside the first one.

The iron plate did not swing to and fro, nor shook intensely left and right, but swayed as it softly gyrated.

From behind Kino, Hermes noted with amusement, "It looks just like a hanged man, Kino!"

"…That's a pretty accurate description, but I'm not sure how to feel about that comparison, Hermes," Kino said, and with her right hand holding Canon still outstretched, she raised the hammer with her thumb.

She aimed, and fired a third shot.

It hit the center of the target, and the roar and the clanging of the metal was heard once more.

"And that's the finishing blow," Hermes added.

“Again that example is—”

Amidst her protest, she let loose another three shots for a total of six.

While waiting for the pan to settle down, Kino disassembled Canon.

She slid the central parts sideways, completely drew out the barrel forward, and removed the lotus root-shaped cylinder. Then she took out a cylinder filled with bullets from her pouch and placed it in.

She returned the ready-to-fire Canon to the holster once more.

“Done? Let’s go!”

“Not yet.”

As she answered, Kino pulled the slim automatic called Woodsman from the back of her waist with her left hand.

While releasing the safety with her thumb, she nimbly raised her arm forward, and rapid-fired three rounds. Dry shots resounded in succession, and the golden bullet casings glittered as they danced in the air one after the other.

The swaying pan received all the bullets, humming with each hit.

Kino replaced the safety and returned Woodsman to its holster.

She let her right hand down limply, then drew it again as fast as she could and took an accurate aim at the target.

Then again. Kino repeated this sequence for a total of three times. The last casing flied out, and the slider that was making its round trip throughout the shots finally stopped in its recoiled position.

“I guess that would do.”

Kino inserted a fresh magazine inside Woodsman, closed the slide, replaced the safety, and returned it to its holster. Then she removed the tiny sponge-like earplugs from both of her ears.

“Kino, you sure are serious when it comes to practice.”

“Well, that’s because this is about the only thing I can’t have others do for me.”

Kino replied as she walked towards the tree to retrieve the target that was swinging to and fro.

And using the bag on top of Hermes' rear carrier as a platform, she proceeded with a quick maintenance of Woodsman.

She took out new bullets from the box and refilled the empty magazine. She also checked whether or not the mainspring of the magazines from her pouches have become loose.

As far as one could see, no animals nor people were in the prairie. Nevertheless, soon after finishing the maintenance check on Woodsman, Kino also began Canon's upkeep. She packed liquid propellant and bullets into its freshly used-up cylinder.

"With that, we would be perfectly fine even if the next country happens to be dangerous!" Hermes said to Kino while waiting for her to finish the chore.

"Setting aside the issue of whether we would be 'perfectly fine' in that kind of situation, it's still better to always have preparation and presence of mind—at least that's what Master always said."

Kino answered as she carefully set in the detonator at the back of the cylinder. The detonator is a tiny propellant-filled metallic cap, which when hit by Canon's hammer, will create a spark that will ignite the propellant and cause the persuader to fire.

"Now that I recall it, some guy I met before told me this. 'You may feel assured by that persuader by your side, but that very object represents your fear.'"

"Fear?"

"According to that person, constantly preparing in the anticipation that you will be attacked is rooted from fear and anxiety towards other people. And so, if you trust the other party, neither of you will have any need for these things, and quarrels can be avoided."

"I see. So what he wants to say is that you're a coward, Kino. What did you tell that person?" Hermes asked.

Having finished her work on the persuader, Kino slightly lifted the hammer with her right hand and rotated the cylinder.

Then she answered.

“That’s precisely the point. I am always afraid. Because it is people who kill people.”

“I see. By the way, is that person someone from a country, or outside?”

“I’m sure you know the answer to that yourself, Hermes.”

“Of course.”

“He’s from a country with decent public order. If you’re going to settle down, better pick a country like that. Hopefully, the same is true for the country we will arrive in,” Kino said.

“Didn’t you say you didn’t know much about the next country?”

“The only thing I heard was that there’s a big country at the western plains. However, that was according to a traveler who came there three years ago, and because that person wouldn’t speak so much about it for some reason, it’s not exactly the most reliable information.”

“It would be very disappointing if that country doesn’t exist.”

“I haven’t lost hope yet,” Kino answered as she returned Canon inside its holster with a practiced hand. Hermes jested, “It’s not only a question of ‘hope’. There’s no use hoping for something that doesn‘t exist in the first place.”

“But you know, not giving up until the very end isn’t a bad thing.”

Kino returned the maintenance tools back in the box, and returned the sleeping bag on top of her luggage. Finally, she checked whether she has left anything behind, and, “Let‘s go.”

She straddled Hermes and kicked the starter, bringing the engine to life.

“Okay! On to the country that may or may not be there!”

Kino answered as she launched Hermes off, “I‘m positive it exists! —And there I‘ll be able to eat lots of delicious food, and sleep on clean white sheets in a nice hotel.”

“Yeah! And I‘ll get fuel, oil, and parts for free! I‘ll also get maintenance from a skilled mechanic! Also for free!”

“Yep. Let‘s not give up on dreaming ‘til the bitter end.”

—

Kino and Hermes continued on their path, trodding on the grassy road.

“It isn’t here, huh?”

“I‘m sure it is.”

“But there‘s nothing.”

“There will be.”

“Then where is it…?”

“It’s here…maybe, hey look!”

By the time they saw the walls before the horizon they‘ve been aiming for, it was already way past noon.

—

Beside the huge entrance to the tall walls was a tiny hut, which was, of course, the guardhouse beside the gates.

“Kino and Hermes! We welcome you to our country! We would like to ask you a few questions before we give you your entry permit. Please answer with all honesty.”

Kino and Hermes were questioned by the middle-aged man who was the country’s immigration officer.

First was their purpose, and the number of days of their stay, as well as,

“What kind of weapon do you have?”

The immigration officer asked this, and not the usual “Do you have any weapons?”

Kino showed the man Canon on her right thigh and Woodsman from behind her waist. She also divulged that she‘s carrying plenty of knives all over her person.

“Wow, that revolver is quite old but looks well-kept for its age.”

The stiff countenance of the officer transformed. With curiosity and interest clear to be seen on his face, he continued on to the next question.

“Have you ever returned fire when your life or possessions have been targeted? To be quite blunt, do you have any experience in killing a person?”

Kino affirmed, and answered that she had done so plenty of times.

“Can you give a rough estimate?”

“I don‘t keep count,” she answered.

“Very well… please wait a moment.”

The officer stood up from his seat and vanished to the back of the room.

I wonder what‘s up? Kino and Hermes muttered. They waited together with the guards who dared not move a muscle from their standing posts.

Eventually, the officer came back in a rush and declared with open delight, “You have been approved! As you requested, you will be allowed to stay for three days. Why not stay longer? You can relax here for as long as you wish!”

Kino said that three days was enough.

“Is that so… Well you can take all of your weapons with you. And if you wish to carry them constantly while sightseeing, you are free to do so.”

Hermes then asked if the citizens were allowed to carry firearms inside the country, and if shootings were common. However, the officer quickly shook his head.

“Oh no. Ordinary citizens are prohibited from carrying persuaders. Only soldiers and police officers are allowed to have them. It‘s not like hunting is possible within the walls.”

The heavy gates slid upwards with a dull grating sound.

With this loud noise at the background, the officer‘s words of caution reached Kino‘s ears.

“The public order in this country is not bad at all. In fact, it is very good. But there are a few crooks who act hostile towards rare travelers, and even make attempts at their lives. Obviously, having our guests targeted will tarnish our country’s reputation. Even so, our police can’t keep constant watch all the time, so please be prepared to defend yourself. That is the reason why we allowed you to keep and carry your weapons.”

—

When they have finally passed through the gates, the country was already bathed by the rays of the evening sun.

Even though the size of the country was something they have expected even before setting foot beyond the gates, it was so wide that they couldn‘t see the opposite side of the walls from where they stood.

The fields were lined up in an orderly manner on both sides of a perfectly straight road. Just like on the other side of the walls, not a single tree could be seen.

Kino and Hermes rode without further need to step on grasses as they proceeded along a perfectly paved road, keeping on its left side.

Once they passed the fields, they saw the neat rows of houses, and soon the huge town spanning the heart of the country came into view.

The road widened into two lanes. Here and there were cars running using electricity, and there were traffic lights at the intersections.

“Hmm, well done. So even a country like this may not be known in other parts, huh?” Hermes commented as they ran.

“I told you it’s here,” Kino replied with a smile.

After passing through the residential area, they entered the part of the town lined up with buildings. And when it was beginning to get dark, they finally arrived at the entrance of the lavish hotel that was recommended to them by the immigration officer.

“Welcome traveler!”

And they were welcomed by the owner of the hotel, who took the pains to personally come out and greet them at the entrance.

Kino and Hermes boarded a huge elevator and were guided to the room at the topmost floor of the ten-storey building.

Kino said that she did not need such a gorgeous and expensive room. However,

“There‘s no need to worry. The country will shoulder all of the expenses.”

The owner told her this with a grin.

“Do you wish to have dinner? We can prepare you a light meal, a full-course meal, or whatever it is that you like.”

—

“Oh dear. There‘s more food coming?”

While Hermes looked on in shock, Kino ate, to her heart’s content, all the dishes served to her one after the other.

After resting for a bit after the meal, Kino soaked for a good while in the bathtub. She turned in her clothes for laundry, and changed into the pajamas provided by the hotel.

“The food was so great… I‘m glad I came here…”

While seated on the huge bed covered with pristine white sheets, Kino looked outside the window at the evening scenery offered by the orderly rows of buildings in the town.

Hermes spoke from behind.

"But this treatment you're receiving is really suspicious. Maybe all that food earlier was a marital offer?"

"… Final supper?"

"Yes, that's it!"

Hermes fell silent for a moment, and then,

"They say death row convicts are given a nice supper on the night before their execution."

"Sounds like bad news," Kino muttered without a drop of worry in her tone.

"What are you going to do if that were really the case?" Hermes asked in a tone equally devoid of seriousness.

"In times of trouble—"

"Yeah?"

"Whatever, I'm gonna sleep now."

Kino flipped off the switch at her bedside, closing the curtains of the enormous windows, and threw herself into the bed.

"'Kay, good night."

—

The next morning, that is, the second day since they entered the country—

Kino woke up at dawn.

She did some light exercises, took a shower, and changed into the clean clothes that were washed the previous night.

Upon opening the curtains, she was greeted with a beautifully clear sky that was only beginning to brighten up.

Kino carried her bag to the center of the large room and emptied it of its contents.

Her neatly folded brown coat, the tiny and dirty tent, the sleeping bag that was full of patches, the portable cooking stove that had clearly been used for a long time, a mug with dents all over, a tin can containing tea bags, a portable light with scratches all over it, and so on.

Kino began to sort and consolidate her various luggage and implements, and repaired the items that needed it.

Lastly she lined up her assortment of knives.

“Maybe I should attend to this for once.”

She moistened the blades with water and sharpened them thoroughly on a grindstone.

The rays of the rising run filtered through the window and glistened on the sharpened blades.

“That’s rare of you to do. It must be going to rain spears today.”

Were Hermes‘ first words for the day.

“I say you waking up this early by yourself is a miracle in itself, Hermes.”

Kino answered as she sharpened a slim-bladed type.

“Maybe it is. —Morning, Kino.”

Kino turned to Hermes,

“Good morning, Hermes.”

—

After eating a breakfast that was ten times grander than her usual fare,

“I‘m so stuffed… I don’t want to move anymore.”

“Laziness is bad for humans. Although eating plenty at breakfast and lightly for dinner is only natural for animals.”

“Then maybe I should relax the whole day in my room. The way animals do.”

“You‘ll get fat. Trust me. Especially because your typical eating habits consist of frugal meals.”

“I’ve got no choice then… shall we take a stroll?”

“When we find a mechanic, don‘t forget to have my oil changed, okay?”

And so Kino and Hermes went for a stroll around the country.

Just like the previous day, Kino wore her black jacket and fastened it at the waist with a belt. She then installed the pouches containing spare magazines and her two persuaders in their respective places along it.

She left most of her luggage in the hotel room, and only placed a few tools inside the boxes at Hermes‘ side.

“Kino, Hermes, are you heading out?”

Just as they were about to exit the lobby, the owner called out to them.

He handed Kino a thin, folding plastic object.

“This serves as a map of this country. However, for our country’s protection, you may not take it out of the walls. We will have to collect it from you later, so please be careful not to lose it.”

“I understand. I‘ll be using this then.”

Kino and Hermes looked at the map together, and asked the owner where they could find a mechanic.

The owner took the map for a second and marked it with a pen.

“There are many car repair shops lined up along this street in this area,” he explained as he handed back the map.

Kino took it back with a word of thanks, and left amidst the respectful send-offs from the owner and the hotel attendants.

As soon as the automatic doors closed, the owner lifted his head. He was smiling.

Then he yelled out with a voice loud enough to be heard across the lobby.

Now everyone! Time to tune in to the TV!

—

As opposed to the electric cars soundlessly crowding the streets, Kino and Hermes rode, accompanied by the roar of Hermes‘ engine, which was by no means quiet.

“This is kinda awkward.”

“Don’t sweat it, it’s not gonna hurt anyone. And besides, look.”

When they stopped before a stoplight, Kino looked at a rectangular box affixed beside the traffic lights and stared back at the lens buried in its center.

“Surveillance cameras. I‘ve been seeing those all over the place for a while now. This type has a pretty wide range, with almost no blind spots to speak of,” Hermes said.

“This country probably keeps its peace and order with the help of those cameras. But that only means that we are also under constant observation.”

When the lights turned green, Kino slowly loosened the accelerator and gently accelerated.

“That must be to prevent you from taking advantage of the free food,” Hermes said.

—

[This is kinda awkward.]

[Don’t sweat it, it’s not gonna hurt anyone.]

The hotel owner observed this scene through a monitor. The crisp image captured by the camera, and the clear voices picked up by the high-end microphone flowed from the huge screen.

The camera chased after Kino and Hermes who were constantly on-the-move.

When it could no longer do so, another camera would take its place.

[And besides, look.]

Kino turned towards the camera.

—

Kino and Hermes first headed to the street lined up with car repair shops.

As they were told, there were plenty of shops in the area. And among the shopkeepers calling for their attention, “Let‘s go with that mister over there.”

Hermes had personally chosen the shop where he would have his maintenance and oil change done.

And as expected, since the country would shoulder all expenses,

“I feel like my axle has gotten heavy.”

“Please replace my wires. My plugs and tires too!”

Hermes made one request after another.

It took several hours, until finally it was time for lunch.

“Ah, I feel so refreshed!”

“Refreshed?”

“Metaphorically speaking, you know.”

Amidst another send-off, Kino and Hermes left the repair shop and rode the streets again.

“Why did you choose that shop? Indeed, the mechanic was quite skilled,” Kino asked Hermes.

“I ‘saw’ his skills. That mister’s hands were quite dirty. Didn‘t you see the oil stuck in his fingernails and in the creases of his palms?”

“No, I didn’t notice.”

“They‘re grimy. That only means he doesn‘t leave the dirty work to other people. It‘s proof that he does the repairs himself.”

“I see… he ‘gets his hands dirty‘ so to speak.”

“It only shows that you don‘t do maintenance work yourself. You should learn from that guy.”

“Sure, if you‘re fine with getting damaged.”

“Um, it‘s always best to leave the work to pros, after all.”

“I think so too.”

As the topic of the conversation changed, Kino and Hermes arrived at the center of the country.

There was a park, made green by the grass and lawn but without a single tree in sight. The entrance to the park was lined up with food carts.

Wondering if there was a festival of some sort, they asked around and learned that the food carts service employees working in a nearby office block.

“Now that you know, why don‘t you eat here too? This fried bread goes well with cinnamon!”

“Oh! It’s the traveler! You won‘t be able to find our meatball noodles anywhere else in this country! Come and try it!”

“Traveler! We have delicious hotdogs over here! You can have as much cheese and veggie toppings as you want!”

“Don’t just eat, have some drinks too! Here have this tea. How much honey do you want in it?”

“You’ll forget about leaving this place once you’ve tasted our deluxe ice cream!”

Before the place got crowded for lunch, Kino swept through the row of shops. She did not turn down their invitations.

—

After enthusiastically gorging herself with food,

“Ah… I‘m stuffed…”

Kino distanced herself from the food carts that were slowly collecting a crowd, and lay sprawled on the lawn inside the deserted park.

“You eat too much.”

Hermes spoke to Kino from the paved walkway, not too far away from where Kino lay.

The sky was perfectly blue without a single cloud in sight, and the air was warm. Kino, whose eyes were fixed on this scenery, answered back, “But I feel kinda weird, Hermes.”

“That‘s because you ate a lot last night and this morning too. Your stomach’s fuller than usual. If you continue that kind of lifestyle, you‘ll gain weight from all the excess calories.”

“Then I should do some exercise… But that can come later.”

“If you sleep right after eating too much…”

“I know, I know. I‘ll turn into a cow, right?”

“Yep.”

—

A man was approaching Kino and Hermes.

He looked to be around his fifties, with the hairline of his short hair visibly receded. He was thin and wore light-brown overalls. He held a pair of huge garden scissors with his right hand, while he carried a cloth sack in his left.

The man initially walked along the paved path, but suddenly changed direction towards the lawn when he reached Hermes. He walked towards Kino as he trampled on the grass.

“Are you the traveler?” the man called out in a loud voice as he steadily approached Kino, who had removed her gaze from the sky to look at him.

Kino slowly got up, and locked gazes with the man.

“Yeah.”

She brushed her pants as she stood up.

“Oh, I‘m sorry for waking you up.”

The man appeared apologetic as he stopped in his tracks, only five meters away from Kino.

He turned his gaze towards Hermes.

“So you came here using that motorrad? That‘s amazing. I also hope to leave the country someday on a journey with a vehicle like that,” he said with profound fascination. Then his face became serious as he went on, “But before I can do that, there‘s something I‘ve got to do first.”

Without taking her eyes off the man, Kino assumed an air of interest, and answered,

“Really now?”

“Yeah,” the man muttered. At the same time, he dropped the sack by his feet.

“And that is to kill you!”

Screaming, he opened the scissors as far as it could, and charged towards Kino with its blades.

—

[And that is to kill you!]

The man‘s voice resounded from the enormous speakers beside the monitor.

At the right side of the monitor was Kino with her back turned from the audience.

And at the upper left was the man, brandishing the scissors not at a tree branch, but towards Kino‘s neck.

When there was only half the distance remaining between Kino and the man, a white smoke arose from Kino‘s right thigh. At the same time, the speakers transmitted a heavy, explosive roar so loud it felt like it would break.

With his battle cry frozen into his expression and voice, and with his hands still tightly clutching the giant scissors, the man fell forward.

One blade of the scissor pierced into the soft soil of the lawn, and the other skewered the body of the man who fell on it.

There was a dull thud as the man slumped on the ground,

“Guh…”

And a gasp escaped the man‘s lips as he tried to lift his head,

“Aah… ugh…”

Groaning, the man was able to lift his head ever so slightly—

Thump

But it soon fell, and the man never moved again.

Someone watching, almost glued to his screen, cheered.

“J-just a single hit…! Amazing! This is great!”

—

Kino waited several seconds after killing the man.

After she was certain that the man has completely stopped moving, she returned Canon, the persuader she just fired from her hip, back to its holster.

“Kino, when did you become suspicious of the guy?” Hermes asked from where he stood.

“The moment I saw him,” Kino answered indifferently.

“Eh, how come?” Hermes asked, this time sounding thrilled.

“Because of those huge garden scissors.”

“Hm? Oh I get it! That thing is absolutely useless in a park without a single tree. In the first place, it doesn’t make sense for such a tool to exist in this country.”

“Good grief… It turned out just like how the officer said,” Kino sighed.

“It‘s a good thing they allowed you to carry around your persuader.”

“You bet.”

“So, what about your interrupted nap?”

“That chased the sleep from me. —Oh right, we‘ve got to call the police or something.”

“Don‘t bother, Kino.”

“Hm?”

Once Kino shifted her gaze away from the corpse, she saw police in navy blue uniforms rushing frantically towards them.

—

“He’s dead.”

“I see. We‘ll call for the disposal team.”

The police personnel who rushed at the scene first confirmed the man‘s condition.

Then the one who looked to be the highest-ranking among them spoke to Kino.

“This is really unfortunate, traveler. Are you all right?”

“I‘m fine. What about the interrogation?”

“That would be unnecessary. There is proof that this man has attacked you without any provocation. Once we communicate with headquarters, we can confirm this from the footage taken by the surveillance cameras, and your actions will be deemed as legitimate self-defense.”

“Why of course,” Hermes chimed in.

“We know that you are busy so we shall not take any more of your time, traveler. Please leave the rest to us, and carry on with your sightseeing,” the police officer continued.

“Okay, I‘ll leave it to you then.”

Kino said, and pushed Hermes along as she walked away from the scene.

—

When Kino and Hermes were completely out of view, the police started to chat amongst themselves.

“Would you look at this. A single shot to the chest, right where the heart is,” a young officer remarked.

“And the speed with which that weapon was drawn…,” the man who apologized to Kino replied.

“That fellow probably never missed a single shooting practice.”

“That‘s not enough to be able to do something like this.”

“What do you mean?”

The more experienced officer faced the younger one.

“That traveler can instantaneously react to a fatal threat.”

“And that means?”

“When faced with danger, a normal person‘s initial reaction is fear. That results in a momentary immobilization, preventing the person from immediately reacting to the danger.”

“I see…”

“But that traveler was different. He swiftly determined the appropriate plan of action to protect his own life, and carried it out calmly and with indifference. That has nothing to do with skill in using a persuader.”

“Then how did that traveler learn to do that?”

“There is only one way.”

“Which is?”

“To have your life in danger.”

“…”

“I‘m sure that traveler has faced mortal danger countless of times before now. And he managed to survive each and every single one of those threats. He either escaped, or otherwise—”

“Killed?”

“Of course. Otherwise he wouldn‘t be alive right now.”

“… Well that‘s amazing. But personally, I wouldn‘t want my family to experience such a thing.”

“Same here. Not only our families. I won‘t allow anyone from this country to experience that. And that‘s the reason why we and the army exist.”

——

Kino and Hermes rode the streets again after leaving the park. After a while,

“Why books?”

“Because they make you smarter.”

They found a bookstore in the enormous shopping district.

“It‘s not like you‘ll buy any because we can‘t carry those with us. And reading in a bookstore isn‘t exactly a nice thing, you know.”

“I won‘t take long.”

Kino stopped Hermes at the parking area beside the street, took off her hat and goggles, and inserted them between her belt and waist before finally entering the shop.

“This place sure seems deserted though.”

Left by himself, Hermes muttered as he looked around and noted the noticeable lack of people in the shopping district.

—

The glass door opened with the clink of a bell, and Kino entered the store.

“Oh, if it isn‘t the traveler! Please, take your time.”

The young female shopkeeper sitting behind the counter just next to the entrance greeted Kino.

The long and narrow interior of the shop was lined with ceiling-high shelves that continued well into the inner part of the room. There were no signs of other customers.

Kino acknowledged the greeting with a short hello, and turned her gaze to the rows of bookshelves.

She proceeded to the deserted inner area through a narrow aisle illuminated by a light bulb. It was narrow to the extent that two people passing through would brush with each other. Fortunately, nobody else was there at the moment.

After a while of browsing the titles, Kino settled with a picture book on edible grasses, and was about to begin reading it when, “…”

She heard the clinking of the bell, prompting her to look at the direction of the sound.

The counter by the entrance, which was visible beyond the rows of bookshelves, was empty. The sound of the bell signified not someone entering the shop, but someone leaving it.

Kino turned her attention back to the opened book in her hands.

“Ah, so this one can be eaten if boiled carefully…”

Kino went on to read a few more pages inside the shop that has grown even quieter.

"…"

Then she heard the bell clink for the third time.

When she took a glimpse at the entrance, this time she saw a person.

It was a woman in her forties. She wore an apron on top of a green dress—it almost seems like she had stopped in the middle of housework just to visit the bookstore. She also had a shoulder bag with her.

"Oh my, is the shopkeeper not around?"

Right after stepping inside the store, the woman muttered, not talking to anyone in particular.

"She went out a while ago," Kino replied with a rather loud voice.

"Oh, aren't you the traveler? Why, welcome to our country!"

The woman said, smiling from ear to ear as she headed straight for the aisle in between the shelves.

"…"

Kino closed the picture book and neatly returned it back to its place in the shelf.

"I'll probably get scolded if I get these books dirty."

—

[I'll probably get scolded if I get these books dirty.]

The microphone picked up the voice clearly and delivered it through the speakers beside the monitor.

Meanwhile the monitor displayed the footage from the camera hanging from the ceiling, showing everything that was taking place in the aisle.

Kino was at the right edge of the screen, facing the camera. The woman was approaching from the entrance with a smile on her face.

Kino moved, disappearing to the right of the screen. Soon after,

[W-wait! Hold it right there!]

The woman's face suddenly took on a murderous expression as she broke into a run.

She revealed the huge cleaver from the shoulder bag she was carrying, and gripped it with her right hand.

The woman was still visible in the screen, but the camera changed to Kino, who ran to the innermost part of the store and quickly moved to an adjacent aisle.

Kino dashed for the entrance. This time the camera switched to the footage taken by the surveillance camera installed near the entrance.

Due to the intense sunlight filtering through the glass door and windows, Kino‘s running figure became blurred.

“What‘s wrong with this thing! Show me what‘s happening!”

Someone watching yelled, growing impatient at his monitor.

[I won‘t let you get away!]

The maddened howl of the woman, who had not found Kino at the interior of the shop, was heard along with her hasty footsteps on the floor.

Kino appeared on the monitor. She was in front of the brightly lit entrance, being shined upon by the rays of the sun.

[There you are! Don‘t you move from that spot!]

Ignoring the woman‘s words, Kino began to open the door.

[…]

And realized that it was locked.

At the same time,

[Waaaaaaaaa!]

She noticed the woman charging towards her, brandishing her cleaver up high.

Kino turned around, her glare never leaving the woman closing in, as she reached her right hand to her waist.

And without taking hold of Canon‘s grip placed there, she placed her palms by her belt, stretched out her left leg in a sweeping motion, targeting the the woman’s feet.

In her sliding position, Kino used the soles of her left boot to catch on the woman’s left shin.

[W-wah!]

In her attempt to bring down the cleaver towards Kino, the woman lost her balance, still propelled by the force of her dash. She passed obliquely over the crouched Kino.

And not able to stop herself, she crashed head first towards the glass door, the cleaver still held tightly in her grasp.

The sound of breaking glass as well as the sound of the woman’s large build distorting the door frame was heard.

Kino immediately turned around as she stood up, and stepped back to the aisle away from the door. Having entered the now blurry interior of the shop, she vanished from view except for her feet.

Along with the sound of the glass sheet smashed into tiny bits on the floor,

[Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa……]

Were the woman’s groan, which sounded like a muddled snore.

[Gaaaa… A-]

This suddenly faded out, and the footage quickly changed to a different camera.

It was not an image of Kino. Instead, it showed the footage of the glass door entrance as taken from the outside.

There was the bookstore’s glass door, the upper part of which was impaled with the woman’s limp body. Both of her arms sagged lifelessly, the cleaver finally free from her grasp.

No wounds could be seen.

Only the deep crimson blood sluggishly flowing from the throat of the woman, whose dangling body quivered slightly from convulsions.

The bright red blood poured from her arms and down the door like water gushing from a waterfall, eventually transforming the color of the floor mat on the doorstep that read ‘Welcome’.

“Ahahahahaha! That hag got her neck arteries gashed by broken glass! This one’s a goner for sure! A goner!”

Someone watching cheered, delighted by the unexpected development.

—

While watching the now lifeless body of the woman, who only a few seconds earlier got herself embedded in a glass door, and a few seconds before that, entered the store in pursuit of Kino, “What in the world is up with this place?” Hermes muttered. “Well, it's fine as long as Kino doesn't complain of not being able to read in peace.”

The few people walking around the desolate shopping district soon heard the sirens of police cars.

—

“We can’t apologize enough… Having a guest who had just entered the country be involved in an incident like this—”

A middle-aged police officer, different from the one they met from the park, apologized profusely to Kino again and again, as he wiped the beads of sweat dribbling from his face.

Kino stood beside Hermes, casting a sidelong glance to the other police officers taking pictures of the corpse clinging from the glass door.

“The surveillance cameras inside the store caught everything on tape. You will not be held liable for anything, traveler. As for this woman’s motives, we will have to make a detailed investigation to find out… At any rate, I am very much relieved that you are not injured.”

“This is the second time today. Do your citizens have something against travelers or something?” Hermes commented, prompting the police to reply apologetically, “No, not at all! —A country with a population as huge as ours will definitely have one or two people with a few loose screws, don’t you think? We also heard about what happened in the park. We can’t apologize enough… Please leave everything to us, and enjoy your tour.”

Saying the same thing as the previous police officer.

“Okay, I’ll leave it to you then.”

Kino replied as she had before, and pushed Hermes along as she walked away from the scene.

—

“Let’s call it a day and go back to the hotel, Kino.”

“I was thinking of that too… but if we go back, we don’t have anything to do.”

“Go nap. That’s one specialty of yours that you love, right?”

“I wouldn’t call it a specialty… Anyway, if I take a nap, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night, and that would be a waste.”

“You’re a cheapskate even with that?”

“Other than that, if you get yourself busy during the day, your dinner will taste delicious.”

“So that’s what you’re after!”

Kino and Hermes rode along the streets during this exchange.

It was a road beside the green belt intervening the residential area and the office block, in the suburbs a short distance from the center. It was lined up with equally-spaced street lights made to look like old, traditional gas lights.

The green park covered with grass but no trees was situated in a long and narrow area, and continued along the length of the road.

It was already past noon. The weather was perfect, yet there were no other cars on the road, nor any signs of people in the park.

Inside the park, they found a small hut made into a shop, with tables and chairs lined up in front of it.

“I wonder if that’s a teahouse? Just perfect. Let’s go rest there for a while.”

Kino dropped Hermes’ speed.

“Because it’s free?”

“Well, there’s that too.”

Kino veered the handle towards the paved walkway, and got off the street. She quickly cut the engine and alighted, pushing Hermes into the park entrance.

As Kino expected, the hut was a tiny cafe. The shopkeeper—a young man around twenties listening idly to the radio—hastily opened the window of the counter when he saw Kino approaching.

“W-welcome! —Oh! It’s the traveler…”

“Can I have some tea?”

“Of course! The country will pay for everything so it’s free!”

From the assortment of teas, Kino picked a variety she wasn’t able to try during lunch. The shopkeeper also offered her a selection of desserts, but she turned them down and only accepted two chocolate chip cookies.

Kino propped Hermes on his stand beside one of the vacant tables, then seated herself and waited.

She removed her hat and goggles and hung them on Hermes’ handles.

“Thank you for waiting. Here it is.”

Soon the shopkeeper came with a pot and a cup on a tray.

After inquiring about the tea’s contents, Kino began to drink.

Then Hermes asked after the shopkeeper left,

“Any poison?”

“Doesn’t seem to have any. It’s delicious, though.”

—

The young shopkeeper who returned to his hut closed the door and locked it in a flurry.

And then,

“Haah…”

His body quivering, he crouched and grabbed the receiver of the telephone on top of the shelf. Clutching it tight, he crawled into the interior of the shop. Surrounded by the shelves containing cans of tea and other ingredients, he pushed the buttons on the phone with trembling hands.

[Yes?]

Without even ringing once, the person on the other line answered.

“U-um…”

Through the chattering of his back teeth, the shopkeeper only managed to squeeze these sounds.

[We see him. Thank you for your cooperation. It would be best if you remain where you are. No matter what happens, don’t show your face.]

—

Under the blue sky, Kino drank her tea in ease.

After finishing her second pouring of tea from the pot, and just when Hermes was talking about caterpillars and stringed musical instruments, “You have a guest. Look behind you.”

Kino slowly looked back at Hermes’ urging.

An old man was walking in the park.

He looked to be really old, beyond eighty years of age.

He was completely bald, and had a thin body, with his back slightly bent. He wore overalls and a checkered shirt, something likely to be worn by a manual laborer or peasant. He was pulling a cart, which though small, looked heavy because of the large portable plastic storage tank on top of it.

The old man slowly approached Kino and Hermes. His wrinkle-ridden face held a stern look.

“So the next one who wants to try his luck is this guy, huh?”

Hermes said in his usual tone, making it hard to discern if he was joking or being serious.

“Well then— maybe we should get going now that I’ve finished my tea.”

Saying this in her normal tone, Kino immediately stood up. She put on her hat, and let her goggles hang down her neck.

Then she pushed Hermes and walked towards the exit of the park, away from the old man.

Soon after,

“H-hey you! You with the bike!”

The old man yelled and ran, his actions showing clear desperation. However, he couldn’t move fast due to the heavy cart he was pulling along.

“W-wait! —Stop! Don’t you run from me! I’m going to kill you! Stop! Get back here so I can kill you!”

The old man yelled a second time.

“Hey, he’s asking you to stop, you know?”

"Good grief. This isn't funny."

Kino answered, continuing to push Hermes. Once at the park's exit, she stopped. Then she straddled Hermes and started the engine.

"Come on—let's run."

—

[Come on—let's run.]

Kino's voice resounded from the speakers beside the monitor.

The camera installed on the street lights picked up the image of the walkway beside the park with Kino straddling Hermes and starting his engine. The monitor displayed the image at an angle from above.

Kino rode off with Hermes, and plied the left side of the perfectly straight road.

After a while, the camera switched views.

Kino and Hermes appeared from the upper portion of the monitor, proceeding downwards, out of the monitor. After they left, The cursing old man, now short of breath, appeared at the same scene in the monitor, dragging along his cart.

The old man stepped out of the walkway into the middle of the road, and glared daggers at the direction Kino and Hermes disappeared to.

[Stop running, you coward! Coward!]

He began to yell insults as he pleased. The next moment, he was hit from behind by a car riding at a furious speed.

The tiny car appeared at the middle of the screen in an instant, carelessly bumping into the old man without even making an effort to dodge, and ran to the front of the screen and out of view.

The old man's body rotated along its length three times, and spun slowly in the air before finally falling, head first, to the ground.

There was the sound of something splitting and breaking, and the screen was splattered with red blood and scattered brains.

And at the right side of the screen, the plastic tank had been knocked off beside the street, its liquid contents strewn flashily.

The cart fell last, creating a tiny spark that made the fluid burst into flames.

The crimson flames occupied half of the right side of the screen, while the rest became covered with darkness.

The flames spread at the feet of the old man, and in no time, his shoes, trousers and legs became mercilessly consumed by the blaze. Yet, the old man did not move.

“So that geezer was about to splash gasoline!”

Someone watching said, utterly amused.

—

“I wonder if it’s safe now.”

Kino has run for around two hundred meters, yet the landscape around her hasn’t changed much. She stopped Hermes to the left.

“Nope. It’s best to continue running. We have one more guest.”

Hermes said. When Kino turned around, she noticed the billowing black smoke from afar,

“Whoa.”

And a car speeding straight towards them.

—

The camera was switching repeatedly.

The screen focused on the road beside the park. Soon Kino and Hermes appeared, riding from the right to the left edge, accompanied with the sound of the engine‘s roar altered by the Doppler effect. Three seconds later, the tiny car followed, only its tires audible.

This kind of footage was repeated four more times.

[There have been countless attempts on my li——, but this is the first time someone tried to run me over with a car. Usually they‘d use a pers——er or a knife.]

[Well—— Among countries with high volume of traffic this —— happen every day. Be—— be careful.]

Kino and Hermes' voices were transmitted in choppy portions.

[Scary——]

[You bet——]

[B— you know, that car can‘t catch up to us with that speed.]

[What do you mean?]

[That kind of electric car was constr—— in a way so that no matter how much you ram its accele—— pedal, it's speed won't go beyond a certain limit. So, we can go on with this game of tag forever.]

[That sounds like good news, but we can‘t ke—— with this for long. Once we reach the city pro—]

Eventually, the perfectly straight road they‘ve been traversing for a while appeared to be heading towards an intersection.

The monitor displayed footage of the intersection. At the four corners of the cross-shaped junction stood thick iron posts from which the traffic lights were hanging.

Kino, who appeared on the screen, hit the brakes all of a sudden. Their speed dropped at once.

This was followed by Hermes‘ voice.

[Eh? What are you doing?]

Without answering the question, Kino maneuvered around the post at a slow speed, then stopped. The next instant, the car came crashing into the post.

The car that was maintaining a considerable speed in its pursuit of Kino and Hermes charged the moment it found an opportunity, and as a consequence, crashed into the post that was right in its path.

There was a strong, explosive sound as the entire frame of the car sank into the post and its rear end left the ground.

The post warped from the impact, and lurched to the side of the car with an unpleasant creak. At the same time, the rear end that momentarily took to air fell back on the road.

The camera switched once more, now taking a view of the driver‘s seat of the car from overhead. There was a white, sturdy looking balloon that inflated from the steering wheel, which prevented the driver from pitching forward.

[Oh it‘s an airbag. Must have learned a lesson from that lady earlier.]

Hermes‘ impressed remark was heard, though he wasn‘t visible in the monitor.

The balloon soon shrunk, as if giving the camera a chance to show the driver‘s current state.

The one fastened with a seat belt on the smoking driver seat was a young woman. She looked to be only in her mid-twenties. It was an undeniably beautiful woman, with long brown hair now a dishevelled mess, and whose short pants and tank top leaves little of her skin unexposed.

The woman slowly lifted her head, and looked beyond the front glass that was now riddled with cracks. And when she realised that she crashed on nothing else but a post, *[Damn!]*

She cursed as she all but kicked the door open, and jumped out of the car.

[She‘s tougher than she looks.]

The camera switched again just when Hermes‘ comment was heard.

On the right side of the screen, the woman could be seen getting out of her car, while on the left side was Kino, still astride Hermes.

The woman limped for a few steps before finally finding her balance. She looked left and right, searching for Kino, and found her in no time. She then cried out, *[H-help me! Please! My car‘s brake didn‘t work!]*

“Hey, hey! That‘s obviously a lie!”

Someone watching spat, evidently outraged.

“There’s no way the traveler would believe that lie!”

[Okay, I‘ll help you.]

“Huh…?”

[I‘ll call the police for help, so please stay where you are.]

The screen showed Kino’s composed expression, as well as her right hand on the ready over the revolver on her waist.

“Ahaha! So that‘s not it!”

Someone watching roared in laughter.

While the woman onscreen howled back,

[Don’t mess with me!]

As her back was facing the camera, her expression couldn‘t be seen.

[What exactly do you mean by that?]

Kino asked.

[I mean it exactly as I said! You! Do you even know what you want to do with your life?]

As she screamed, she turned to the back of the car and opened its trunk. The interior was dark and obscured from view.

[People like you should just go to hell! That way, I can finally attain happiness! You understand, don’t you?]

The woman shoved both of her hands into the trunk, and grabbed hold of something.

[Anyway, no one would mourn for someone like you even if you die, right?]

The object she was clutching was something long and narrow, hidden inside a cloth bag. Kino slowly pulled out Canon from its holster.

[I, on the other hand, am young and beautiful. My life—]

As she spoke, she dropped the bag at her feet, at the same time taking out its contents. The long and narrow something was a shotgun. And as she posed and pointed it towards Kino, *[Is only beginning!]*

There was a bang.

Kino‘s right hand was outstretched, holding the revolver she had just fired. White smoke unfurled on the left side of the screen in an instant, and soon vanished.

Meanwhile, on the right side was the woman, with blood gushing out of her forehead. She had dropped her persuader, and collapsed right into her car‘s trunk.

There was a dull thud, and the woman‘s torso vanished into the darkness of the trunk. Only her lower body remained under the light of the sun.

[Hm— A bit different, but almost the same as that woman earlier.]

Hermes commented.

[…]

Kino wordlessly waited for a few seconds before finally deciding to return Canon to its holster.

“Alright! That was really cool! You‘re the best, Kino!”

Someone shouted.

—

Kino and Hermes waited until the police arrived.

“Haven’t we had enough? Let’s just leave the corpse and go back to the hotel.”

Hermes said, but Kino only sat on him and patiently waited. The bare legs sticking out of the car’s trunk did not so much as twitch.

Soon the police cars arrived in swarms, accompanied with their blaring sirens. A yet again different set of people stepped out from the cars.

“I can’t possibly apologize enough traveler…”

Their representative apologized to Kino again and again.

“It’s the third time today. Wait, if we include that fishy old guy, it’s the fourth.”

Hermes said, prompting Kino to ask the police about the old man.

“When he went out to the streets, it seems that he was hit by the car this woman was driving.”

“Oh my. Did he die?” Hermes asked.

“Well… yeah.”

“So he wasn’t able to go after us. That’s great isn’t it, Kino.”

“Most certainly. —By the way, it is getting dark, traveler. Maybe you should go back to the hotel?”

“…”

Kino considered the officer’s words for a while before answering,

“I guess I should do that. However, I’m worried I’d get attacked again on my way back. May I request for police escort?”

“Of course!”

The police answered, his expression of utmost delight.

—

The sky was beginning to show the signs of evening.

While the blue sky was busy transforming into a madder red hue, Kino and Hermes rode the streets, flanked by police cars like some cash transport vehicle. Soon they entered the city and were back at the hotel. No one attempted to attack them the entire time.

Leaving the saluting police officers behind, Kino and Hermes entered the lobby, and was greeted by the owner’s ear-to-ear grin.

“Welcome back! How did your tour went?”

“It was really fun!” Hermes answered.

“It was really tiring,” Kino replied, then returned what she has borrowed.

While taking back the map, the owner asked with a worried look on his face,

“We have finished preparations for dinner. But I’m worried that you might have lost your appetite—”

“No, I’ll have some. The same as yesterday’s, if that’s all right.”

Smile returned to the owner’s face, who gladly answered,

“Just as expected! Of course, please sit back and relax!”

—

The next morning, that is, the morning of the third day since they entered the country—

Kino woke up at dawn. The weather was just as clear as the previous day’s.

Inside the large room, she loosened her body with some exercise, and proceeded with her quick draw routine with Canon and Woodsman.

She showered long, as if reluctant to part with it, and wore a white shirt fresh from the laundry.

She gathered her luggage and put them in her bag, and completed her preparations for departure. Then she waited for a while before breakfast.

After finishing the breakfast that was even grander than the previous day’s.

“The most natural thing to do. As an animal.”

Those were Hermes‘ first words for the day.

“So, I wonder what‘s going to rain down this time.”

“No idea. Morning, Kino.”

“Good morning, Hermes.”

—

“You‘re leaving already? That’s a real pity. The next time you visit, please come to our hotel again.”

After the hotel owner saw them off, Kino and Hermes went on their way.

First, they stopped by a store to get some fuel and portable rations. The shop was yet to open, but when its shopkeeper heard the sound of the motorrad‘s engine, he quickly came out of the store.

“Please take this with you! This! And this one too!”

They were all traveling supplies.

“That thing’s about to burst, you know?”

Kino crammed the bag full with as much stuff as Hermes could carry.

There were much more vehicles riding the streets compared to the previous day. And, many times over, as they rode their way to the western gates, “Traveler, please come again!”

“You were really amazing!”

“You‘re the best!”

Pedestrians and drivers alike showered them with such greetings. And among the words they received, “Thank you!”

Was the most numerous of all.

“Thank you?”

Kino tilted her head in wonder, while Hermes could only ask,

“Kino, what did we do in this country?”

“Ate lots of food.”

“There‘s no way they‘d thank you for that. What else?”

“Killed three people.”

“That must be it!”

Hermes said, though whether he was joking or not couldn‘t be discerned from his tone.

“…”

Kino narrowed her eyebrows underneath her goggles.

Kino and Hermes continued down the road and soon exited the city. They passed through the residential area and ran among the fields, until they finally arrived at the western part of the country where the gates were. The gates and the walls were being scorched in the heat of the bright morning sun.

“I would like to proceed with the exit procedures.”

Just when Kino approached the guards before the gates, the door beside it opened.

“Hello there, Kino!”

A man came out from it, greeting them delightedly.

“Oh hi, mister.”

“Hello, Hermes. I‘m glad to see both of you doing well!”

It was the immigration officer who had welcomed them only the day before last.

—

“Okay, we‘re done with the procedures. Thank you for visiting our country. We‘re truly glad to have you!”

They were inside the guardhouse facing the outer gates. The immigration officer sitting at the other side of the table said this with a smile, and sought a handshake from Kino.

"…"

Kino hesitated but accepted the hand offered to her. Then she asked,

"Will you tell me now why those people attempted to murder me?"

"…"

The immigration officer‘s eyes widened in surprise.

"Well… you got us," he said, embarrassed. "Even if I feign ignorance, you two won‘t believe me anyway, I suppose?"

"No." "Nuh-uh."

Kino and Hermes answered at the same time.

"It can‘t be helped. Fine, I‘ll tell you. We‘re actually not allowed to talk about this inside the country, but since this place is technically 'outside' , I‘ll make an exception."

And so, the officer ordered the guards to exit the room, leaving him alone with Kino and Hermes. Only then did he speak again, "You were really a great help!"

Not expecting such a reply, Kino only tilted her head.

"Help with what?" It was Hermes who asked in her stead.

"With those four people yesterday. Though in the end you only killed three of them."

"…"

After pondering for a while, Kino asked, "Those four who attacked me yesterday… just who are they?"

There was an immediate reply.

"They‘re death row convicts."

—

"This is going to be a long story."

The immigration officer started off. He placed his elbows on the desk, and rested his chin on his joined hands. Then he continued, his tone that of amusement.

“I was telling you the truth when I told you the other day that the peace and order in this country is very good. There is little gap between the rich and the common folk, and as you might have noticed, the surveillance cameras scattered all over the country are pretty effective in curbing the number of crimes. Such incidents rarely occur. However, ‘rare’ doesn’t mean ‘never’. Otherwise, this country wouldn‘t have any need for police or jails.”

“I understand. Please go on.”

“And we do have corresponding punishments for these criminals—from fines and penal servitude, to the heaviest of all, which is death penalty. However, in any era, the issue of death penalty has always been suffused with various problems.”

“I presume there are people who were against its ‘inhumane’ methods?”

“That‘s right, Hermes. Those who criticize it stress the cruelty of the methods used as their main driving point. But this was rebutted with a proposal that suggests everyone think of less cruel means. As a result, ever since the country’s founding, the death penalty system changed over and over again.”

The immigration officer then proceeded to enumerate various examples.

First was burning at the stake—a simple and easy method they used in ages past.

However, it was considered brutal because the person dies a slow death. Also, it was a waste of precious fuel.

And so they next chose an approach that did not require a drop of fuel—beheading by sword.

However, if the one going to perform it wasn’t skilful enough, the convict might not be decapitated in one swing. In that case, both the criminal’s agony and the pressure on the executioner became too heavy to bear. Clearly, beheading by sword was considered no less cruel, and was also trashed.

And so the next method they adopted was death by guillotine, a machine that was designed to reliably separate the head from the body, and cause instant death.

However it was much difficult to use in practice. It was employed for some time, but ultimately, it was decided that it was no different from beheading by sword, and was discontinued.

After the guillotine followed death by hanging. It seemed a really simple and efficient method that they thought would finally work.

However, there were numerous occasions that ended in failure because of the rope breaking. Also, too weak a force would cause a slow death, while too much would make the head come off. These, among a slew of other problems, led to the cessation of the practice.

Soon a method utilizing electricity—the electric chair—was discovered. They readily applied the idea, counting on the science behind it.

However, there were many failures on account of the differences in physiques, and it proved surprisingly difficult to bring about instant death using it. There were even claims from the electric company, demanding that their commodity not be used for such purposes.

After that, they next implemented the use of lethal injection. It was allegedly a peaceful method, as a fatal dose is only injected after a drug-induced sleep, making the person feel as little pain as possible.

However, the effects also widely varied depending on the person’s constitution. And the idea of doctors—who are supposed to be saving lives instead of taking them—performing or supervising the procedure rolled up quite a fuss in the medical field.

Last was death by shooting, a method considered convenient and economical because of its use of relatively low-cost bullets.

However, the pressure on the one doing the shooting was too heavy. There’s the worry of executioners who would try to miss on purpose, or use blank cartridges—although that can be distinguished from the presence or absence of recoil. And indeed, there was a time when none of the shots reached their mark.

—

“And that’s the gist of it—. No matter what idea we came up with, dissenters would pop up one way or the other.”

Hermes asked, “Let me ask just to make sure. Even after all that trouble, there was no move to abolish the system altogether?”

“Let me see. At the present, the faction against death penalty has never gotten the majority of the parliament. That’s because there came a popular view in our country of death penalty being a ‘legitimate self-defense’.”

“What do you mean by that?” Kino asked.

“I’ll try to explain, but this is more of a mentality that has deeply penetrated into the masses’ mindset, rather than a collective agreement over what is right.”

With this prudent preface, the immigration office continued the explanation.

“At some point, circumstances gave rise to the right of ‘legitimate self-defense’. This means that you are excused from responsibility for killing someone—a criminal—who is about to carry out his or her crime upon you.”

“Uh-huh. Just like what happened with Kino yesterday.”

“That’s right. However, that there is a ‘criminal’ only means that there was a ‘victim’ who was not able to defend themselves. Even though this right of ‘legitimate self-defense’ should have been able to protect the people, there are still victims. That’s why the country, basically everyone, thought they should enact this right in the victim’s stead, even after the crime. That is, to do the last thing the victim wasn’t able to do—that is our definition of ‘death penalty’.”

“Hmm.”

“Basically, you shall have your right to legitimate self-defense whether you want it or not,” the immigration officer said.

“So what you’re saying is, this country’s death penalty system has something to do with what happened to me yesterday?” Kino asked.

“Exactly. In recent years, the faction opposing the system came up with two more arguments. The first was, ‘take pity on the jail guards who are asked to commit murder’. Well, killing people is part of their work. No matter what kind of method was used, it is true that it is a rather taxing profession. So to speak, it was then necessary to pay heed to the care of the minds of the jail guards who are ‘obligated to kill people in place of others’.”

The immigration officer paused. And then,

“The other one is, ‘because the convicts, too, are human, their hope should not be snuffed out completely’.”

“Huh?”

“Hope? What do you mean?”

Kino titled her head, while Hermes questioned. The immigration officer answered plainly,

“The dissenters said— ‘Humans live off of hope. When the death penalty is decided, all hope is being taken away from the convicts. That is much more cruel than taking their lives away. Even if it is necessary to kill them, you should at least keep their hopes alive. A death penalty system that fails to do that is defective, and should be abolished’. That’s their line of reasoning.”

“Okay,” Hermes said. While Kino asked,

“And that was accepted by the citizens?”

“Well, it penetrated bit by bit. In the end, to allow the perpetuation of the death penalty system, it became necessary to address these two issues: ‘to not lay this heavy burden on any citizen’ and to ‘let the convicts keep their hopes alive’. We need a system that keeps the above arguments in mind. It was a tough problem, and many people thought long and hard about it.”

Before the immigration officer who was effecting a scholarly air,

“I get it!”

“You mean, people like me, that is, travelers…”

Hermes and Kino replied in turn.

"Indeed, how insightful! This country's death penalty system thus makes travelers kill the convicts. We call it the 'TravelPen', short for 'traveler death penalty system'!"

The immigration officer's excited chatter was met with Kino's indifferent question,

"Specifically?"

"It's really simple. When a traveler comes to visit, all of his or her actions are recorded by surveillance cameras. At the same time, a police vehicle containing all of the convicts follow. And when they have come to a place with as little people as possible, they will spur on the criminals, 'This is your final hope. If you can do a good job in killing that traveler, your death sentence will be lifted, and you will be allowed to choose between deportation and a fixed-term sentence.' They could have refused, and just choose the death penalty, but as we expected, they fled off in high spirits. The order was decided by drawing lots."

"I see. Then what about those weapons they have? Those were quite dangerous. There was a car too," Hermes asked.

"Of course the police assigned them weapons that give them the littlest chance of victory. And if they turn against the police with those weapons, they will be shot on sight."

"Then you could just have suggested they do that from the start."

"Well that poses a number of problems."

"The result will be the same."

"That's true, but as you can see, no one can lie because the surveillance cameras are everywhere."

"And the opposing faction accepted this?"

"Perhaps they haven't. But because the arguments they presented were all addressed, they have been laying low. Of course, I don't know what's going to happen in the future."

"I see."

"It's not good for humans to stop thinking. There should be a constant flow of ideas.”

While listening to the conversation going on between Hermes and the immigration officer, Kino was thinking. Then she asked, “When was this system decided on? Was this the first time?”

The officer answered immediately.

“No. This is the fifteenth year since then, and now is the fourth time.”

“Up until now, were any travelers killed?”

The officer grinned, and threw the question back to Kino.

“Surely you know the answer to that?”

“Yeah, I guess. —None, right?”

“Of course! Upon entry, we make sure of the skill of the traveler. They should have a weapon, and should have experience in killing to defend their selves, and should have no qualms as to using force to protect their lives. To be specific, it should be someone tough enough to still be able to eat dinner after killing three people in a day.”

“Kino, he’s praising you,” Hermes said.

“In short… those four yesterday were sent after me armed with the littlest of luck, and whose only ‘chance’ was to get killed by me?” Kino asked in response to the immigration officer.

“Yes. It would be strange otherwise. Those four are death row convicts after all. For the country, they are not to be allowed to live any longer. Failing to kill convicts is the same as allowing your good citizens to be killed.”

“But didn’t you say it yourself? That they have almost no chance of winning?” Hermes asked.

“Of course we don’t tell them that. There’s no need to tell them such a thing. The only requirement is to not take away their final hope. And you Kino, are a perfect target. Seeing that you are young, they would think it is a piece of cake to take you down. It would make them very happy.”

“Oh,” said Hermes. “But if this has happened three times in the past, and even though there was not a single one who was freed by killing a traveler, why would they still choose to do it? Don’t you think they would have noticed already if no one has succeeded thus far?”

“That’s simply because they feel that they can do it because they have no other choice. Humans are prone to resorting to reckless methods when they are cornered. For instance, in a burning building, a lot of people would think they can jump safely from a high floor because the ground ‘doesn’t look high enough to be fatal’.”

The immigration officer continued.

“Just to let you know, I’ll tell you about those four convicts yesterday. The first guy was a serial rapist and murderer. Under the guise of a school teacher, he threatened his students with violence if they exposed him. After several years, there was one female student who was brave enough to sue him. He killed her and threw her corpse in an incinerator. The second one, though she may look like that, was actually also a serial killer. She was jealous of her more affluent friends, so she called four of them to a party and mindlessly stabbed them to death. The third one—the old man—used poison. He owned a restaurant, but when his business weakened due to competition, he poisoned the cooking pots of a rival restaurant, which caused two customers to die and eight more to become seriously ill. And finally, that young woman set fire to the house of her lover who refused to divorce his wife, killing all six family members including a baby. She pretended to be in the fire, but her lie was soon uncovered.”

“Quite the busy bunch, huh.”

The immigration officer returned a bitter smile. “That’s a bit harsh.”

“What about false charges?” Hermes asked in jest.

“Well, as I mentioned above, there is very little chance of that. As you have seen yourself, this country is full of surveillance cameras, so everything can be proven shortly in an investigation.”

“I see. But this doesn't eliminate people who commit crimes, no?”

“Sure, that may be true. Humans are such weak creatures after all. But you know, all we have left are people who were sentenced to death one or two years ago, so I believe our public order is heading to a great direction, though I only hear rumors about other countries' circumstances so I really can't compare. I am just relieved that the enforcement of the penalty has gone without a hitch. Since your stay was short, we had you kill four people in succession. And you did a great job."

The immigration officer smiled. Then his expression tightened as he continued with utmost seriousness.

"I believe most of our citizens would agree that this is a wonderful system. —First, a great majority of our people approved this method. Because none of our citizens had to sully their hands, the guilt over the executions has also lessened. Moreover, the convicts can live their lives without fearing the day of their execution. The only thing they could think of until their deaths is that they could still be saved depending on how well they perform. They continue to live with such strong hopes in their hearts. That's why the prisoners are still very energetic even while in detention. And finally, the families of the victims can watch as the travelers give the criminals their unsightly end. It was most certainly a gratifying sight. By the way, only citizens above a certain age were allowed to watch." "So it was broadcasted after all," Hermes said. The immigration officer beamed with excitement, "I forgot to say, everything was aired live. Yesterday's special must have garnered wonderful ratings! I know because the moment you went out of the hotel, the people disappeared from the streets! I myself was watching everything from a monitor. You were really cool, Kino!"

Kino asked the immigration officer, "Wait… you mean those who 'approved' it were…?"

"Of course! —You were allowed to use your persuader to your heart's content. Wasn't it refreshing?"

"No."

Was Kino's quick response.

"Oh, I guess it was rude of me to assume. But that's only because most of the travelers who came here previously said that. In fact, the one who came three years ago said after the explanation, 'Is that all? I can still go on. Let me take care of all the convicts!'"

"It depends on the person."

"Well, perhaps. Then let me put it this way—'You shall end up in a situation where you will have no other choice but to kill in order to protect your life, that is, in the name of self-defense. But in exchange for that, you shall be given fabulous lodgings and a splendid feast, as well as maintenance for your motorrad and plenty of travel supplies, all free of charge.' In fact, you have already received these things. Travelers who weren't selected for this task weren't able to enjoy such treatment. Wasn't it such a profitable deal?"

"…"

Kino fell silent.

"It's a good thing you were chosen, Kino. And even if you feel differently, it sure was a big deal for me!" Hermes said.

Kino took one breath, and answered firmly, "I take whatever I can whenever possible. —However, I will not go back to this country ever again."

"Oh, what's the matter? —The next time you come, we were thinking of asking for your services again. A feast is waiting for you, you know."

Kino answered, "I ended up not having any free time even during my 'leisurely walk'."

"Well, there isn't much to see in our country anyway. But… even if your specialty is killing, we won't force you if you don't want to do it."

The immigration officer shrugged. Kino waited several seconds before she spoke again.

"I do not enjoy taking lives. All the more, having others watch me kill them like it's some spectacle."

The immigration officer gave a firm nod.

"I see. I understand what you're trying to say. I admit that we may have offended you. However—"

"However?"

“We will continue this death penalty system because it is a necessity.”

“A necessity?”

“Yes. Kino, you killed them because it was necessary for your own survival, right? You had to do it whether or not you enjoyed killing.”

“…”

Kino did not answer the question. The immigration officer smiled,

“It’s the exact same thing.”

Epilogue: A Tale of This World･a -It Happens.･a-

“A Tale of this World ･ a” —It Happens ･ a—[edit]

One day, Kino and Hermes were in a certain savannah.

Atop a slightly elevated hill amidst a vast land, the luggage-laden Hermes stood on his center stand.

It was presently the dry season. The clear, blue sky and the glaring noon sun were being reflected on his silver tank.

Kino was dressed in a black vest over a white shirt, and her hat rested lightly on top of her head. Instead of a sheet, she lay on top of the unassembled tent outspread beside Hermes, with the rifle-type persuader named ‘Flute’ on the ready before her.

Flute stood with its two-legged bipod on the ground, not moving an inch.

Keeping both eyes open, Kino peeked through the scope with her right eye. Within the lens, the view reflected a mother deer and its fawn.

The deer and its tiny offspring leisurely walked over the ground mottled with short grass.

Meanwhile, Hermes—

“Distance, 269. Drop height, 24. Wind direction, 5 o’clock. Wind intensity, 2 to 2.3. Temperature, 26. Humidity, 48.”

—muttered words that sounded like an incantation.

“Got it.”

Kino replied tersely, and while keeping Flute in place, she turned the dial beside the scope with her left hand.

The deer and its offspring gradually overlapped with the crosshairs within the circular field.

The fawn raised its head and exchanged glances with its mother. The two creatures silently gazed at each other as they stopped in their tracks.

At the same time, Kino pulled the trigger. A blast erupted from Flute and the ignited gas sent a tiny metal flying.

It did not take the piece of metal one second to draw a line connecting Kino to the fawn.

It hit the joint of the fawn’s foreleg, sending blood and meat bursting out. Its tiny body buckled and fell down on the parched earth.

“A hit. Good job.”

“No, I missed. I was aiming for an instant death with a single shot through its heart.” Kino replied to Hermes’ compliment with a tone full of regret, not moving Flute away from position.

“It won’t be able to escape and will soon die anyway. Can’t that be considered a ‘hit’?”

“Nope. If it gets wounded, the blood will mix in with the meat, and it won’t be as delicious.”

“Even so, you’ll only grill the steak until it becomes crispy and sprinkle lots of salt and pepper over it. Then you’ll eat it and it’s over. Besides, you don’t have a sensitive palate, at least according to other people.”

“I won’t deny that.”

The image Kino was seeing through the lens of her scope was now that of the mother deer worriedly circling its fawn. It stood right in front of the fawn and blocked Kino’s aim.

Kino talked to the mother deer. “I can imagine how you feel, but please get out of the way.”

“How about scaring it off with two or three shots?”

“What if I hit it? It would no longer be fit for eating. Besides it’s a waste of bullet.”

“Cheapskate. How about going there then?”

“I guess I have no choice…”

Kino closed Flute’s safety and stood up. Then she carried Flute behind her and folded up the tent she spread out, and tied it up on Hermes’ carrier.

And when Kino was about to ride Hermes.

“Hold it!” Hermes exclaimed sharply. Kino quickly positioned Flute in front.

“A person? Or a wild beast?” Kino asked, but Hermes answered differently.

“Neither. Don’t you feel it? There are tremors coming closer.”

“Tremors?”

Kino tilted her head, and then shook it sideways.

And then,

Special Compilation: Various Tales -a Beautiful Dreamer-

Special Compilation: “Various Tales” —A Beautiful Dreamer —[1][edit]

Once, in a certain place, there was Kino.

It was a person clad in a brown coat over a black jacket, and wearing a large-caliber revolver below her hips. No matter how you looked at her, it was without a doubt, Kino.

“Now Hermes, where shall we go?”

“Even if you ask me, there’s only one road,” Hermes answered from beside Kino, and she quickly answered back.

“Well you see, saying that while looking at the horizon feels somewhat ‘traveler-ish’.”

“What do you mean by ‘ish’?”

“It means I also want to act like a traveler.”

“But you *are* a traveler.”

“Now, where shall we go…? You are free to choose our path.”

“Nuh-uh. See here, there’s only one road. Going west from the east and north.”

“But saying that really feels somewhat traveler-ish.”

“That’s why I’m asking you what you mean by ‘ish’.”

“I told you, it means I also want to act like a traveler.”

“And I’m telling you that you *are* a traveler.”

While the human and vehicle dabbled in this pointless conversation, Master happened upon them. She was a woman with beautiful, long black hair, and clad in stylish clothes and a revolver by her waist. She was together with a tag-along handsome (rest omitted) man.

“That’s mean, labelling me a tag-along. At least call me her partner or something…”

You wouldn’t be.

“Good day, traveler,” Master said as she looked at Kino and Hermes.

“Hello. I’m Kino and this here is my partner Hermes.”

“You can call me Master. This here is luggage-carrier,” Master introduced. The luggage-carrier raised some sort of objection, but was ignored.

“It’s really unusual to encounter fellow travelers in a place like this. How about traveling together for a while?”

“Not a bad idea. I have a feeling that this is not our first meeting, but I’m sure I have never met you before.”

And that’s how two humans, one motorrad, and one luggage-carrier got to travel together.

And they all lived happily ever after.

“A Country with Close Ties” —Born to be a Dictator—[edit]

The motorrad and Master’s yellow car (rest omitted) were running along a path in the meadows. It was a nice road, uncluttered with trash, and lined with a few signs along it.

The sun and the white, scattered clouds could be seen amidst the clear sky. Nimya’s plane as well as a tank was flying in it.

“I was right!” Nimya shouted in mid-air. Meanwhile,

“Where? Where are you?” The tank called out.

In the meantime, Kino and Shishou exchanged words as they rode side by side.

"'Master' has an interesting ring to it. What does it mean?"

"That's a fine persuader (Note: A gun) you have there."

"Yes. *I* am Kino."[2]

"You should limit yourself to large-caliber type persuaders, after all. Peashooters won't do anything for you."

"Because I'm only human."

"Mine looks exactly like the one you have. Where did you get it?"

"I am having trouble every single morning because Hermes won't wake up on time."

Eventually, a country came into view. As they were travelers, they entered it.

"Welcome travelers."

Upon entry, the country's citizens welcomed them with smiles.

It was a small country. The country appeared to be very calm and peaceful. No matter where they went, the people were relaxed and welcomed them with a smile.

"Quite a great place. This country," luggage-carrier remarked.

Soon, Kino, Master, Hermes, and luggage-carrier were invited to dinner by the country's chief. As it was a magnificent meal for free, they had no reason to refuse it.

They were led to a spacious banquet hall, and found the chief—a frail old man around ninety years of age—seated at the head of the table. Lined up on the seats next to him were people of roughly the same age. They appeared to be people who held important positions in the country.

And thus a lively banquet proceeded among these people.

"The people in this country have close ties, don't they?" luggage-carrier said.

The chief smiled, "That is our country's pride. What reason do people of the same country have to fight with each other? Getting along with each other is a wonderful thing! —Say, don't you want to live in such a wonderful place?" and invited the travelers. As Master, Kino, and luggage-carrier would cease to be travelers if they stayed, all of them refused.

"A peaceful country, with its people having close ties, is a good thing. It eases the rough mood we encounter during our travels." Master did not forget to pay some lip service.

At that moment, a middle-aged man seated beside luggage-carrier saw the served dish (pan-baked chicken), "It's a bit burnt, can you change mine?" and made this request to the server.

The chief stood up straight. "That well-cooked kind is delicious," he objected, and continued, "You have disturbed the peace. Your punishment will be death penalty."

The man became pale and desperately apologized, but the chief did not lend him an ear. The rest only gave him cold stares, and in front of the travelers who stared on in wonderment, the man was taken away by people who seemed to be policemen.

"No! Anything but the death penalty, ple—"

He vanished to the outside of the room, and after about thirty seconds, *Bang.*

A single shot was heard.

The policemen returned and reported that the execution was carried out without a hitch.

"I'm sorry travelers, that was unsightly," the chief apologized. Kino, Master, luggage-carrier, and Hermes remained in their places and did not show any particular reaction. The chief then explained, "To maintain the peace among the people in this country, the chief's orders are made absolute. A chief should always have a discerning eye for matters that can cause spats and conflicts. It is not allowed to have differences in opinion."

Master only gave a safe "I see" reply.

"Well, let's forget about that fool and enjoy our meal."

And so the chief brought a big slice of chicken to his mouth. He chewed it scrumptiously, and the moment he gulped it down, “Ugh!”

The chief’s face changed color. It became a vivid blue and looked as if he was in a great deal of pain. Looking like that, he fell backwards. The attention of the people around him being in vain, “He’s dead… He died of suffocation…” The sudden death of the chief was announced. His corpse was carried on a stretcher and brought outside the room.

“Now then, this country’s next chief shall be me—” A man, about the same age as the chief stood up from one side and declared. There was not a single objection from anyone.

“Travelers, I welcome you as this country’s new chief.”

“I can see that. —By the way, what are your criteria for choosing the next leader?” Kino asked.

“By age. In this country, the oldest person becomes chief. And the chief’s orders are absolute. Even if a person is older by a mere tenth of a second, he will be the absolute ruler of the country. The young should obey the orders of those who are older. That’s nature’s law. —How about it? Don’t you want to become citizens of this wonderful country now?”

After they finished eating, Kino, Master, Hermes, and luggage-carrier left the country.

And only left the words, ‘Thank you for the wonderful meal.’

“A Land that Gives” —Give and Take—[edit]

Kino, Master, Hermes, and luggage-carrier arrived in a different country. On the way, they were attacked by bandits, who they easily defeated and made a huge profit from. But since it’s boring, I’ll cut that part.

And so at this country’s gates, “Please sign this,” the inspector told them. When Kino asked why, he explained, “It is a letter of consent for you to donate your internal organs in case you died of an accident inside the country. It is an obligation for all of our citizens, and the same holds for our guests."

Kino looked as if she didn't understand so Master explained for her. "The heart and other internal organs of a person who has just died are still usable, so they can be transplanted to help out people suffering from some illnesses."

Because they had no intention of dying, and as there's nothing for them if they do die, the two humans and the luggage-carrier signed.

It was immediately upon entering the country. They stood at the plaza wondering where they should go next, and Kino was looking at her map when a truck came charging with great force straight towards her. With a move faster than Kino, Master pulled out her revolver from her hip and fired. The tire of the truck blew off, and the truck collapsed on its side without hitting Kino. A man was expelled from the driver's seat amidst all the broken glass, and hit his head on the concrete ground. There was an unpleasant sound, and soon he stopped moving.

"That was close."

"Yeah. Thank you very much."

The luggage-carrier who only looked on from beginning to end finally had a chance to speak. "But what's with that? To me, that looked anything but an accident."

People began to swarm around the man, and soon, his corpse was carried away.

"What was that, indeed?" Master also wondered, so they grabbed a nearby onlooker and asked him about the incident.

"Oh t-t-that. It's probably because the traveler over there was just perfect."

"Just perfect?" Kino asked, and Hermes elaborated, "What's perfect?"

"Her age and physique. The moment you entered the country, you were made to sign a consent form, right? Because of that, you should only expect to get targeted in this country."

"You mean, they kill someone and make them donate their organs?"

"What else? Humans can do this much for the sake of the people they love."

"Then that driver…"

"Yes. I imagine he has a daughter or son needing a transplant. But it seems like he's now the one who gets to donate his organs. Why, people who are in line for transplants look forward to weekends where there is one traffic accident after another. Please be careful not to get killed and have someone get saved by your organs. Well, you are pretty skilled, so I guess there's no need for you to worry," the man said, and left, looking around him with profound caution.

During their three-day stay, Kino and Master were targeted twice, and luggage-carrier was targeted once.

"Good grief."

Meanwhile, Hermes got two on his handlebars, five on his tires, and three on his frame—robbery attempts, that is.

"That was quite fun, wasn't it, Master."

"Yes, it is."

And so Kino, Master, Hermes, and luggage-carrier left the country.

"A Brilliant Country" —Creators—[edit]

The next place Kino, Master, Hermes, and the rest entered in was a…

"That's mean!"

The next place Kino, Master, Hermes, and luggage-carrier entered in was a normal country.

It was a country which was normal in size, technology, and prosperity. It's a normal country. To put in other words, it's a boring country.

"From time to time, it's not bad to see a country with no quirks, like this one.

Right, Kino?”

“I agree. Let’s relax this time, Master.”

Soon they found a hotel, and as they were drinking their tea in the lobby, “Welcome to our country. Aren’t you glad to have visited such a wonderful country?”

A resident said. Without them noticing it, they were surrounded by people of all ages and genders. Every single one of them held a conceited air.

“Our country is the most wonderful country in this world!” “Yeah!” “That’s right!”

The residents declared with overflowing confidence. However, as Kino, Master, Hermes, and luggage-carrier weren’t too impressed, they only interjected with insincere yeah’s, right’s, and oh’s.

“Ah of course, travelers who have just entered won’t be able to appreciate our country’s greatness. —Fine then, let me give you the details.”

The travelers only had ‘You don’t have to,’ or ‘We didn’t ask you for it,’ in their minds, but they kept these thoughts to themselves.

They began. First, this country’s history was apparently, amazing.

“Our country has over ten thousand years of history! Around the time when humans from other countries used stone tools and living barbaric lives, our country has already developed a fine civilization!”

And they also said this: Most of the great inventions and discoveries in the world originated from their country.

“These great inventions and discoveries were accomplished by our great country. Wheels, iron, science, culture—everything—originated from our country! Even those persuaders that you use were invented by our blacksmiths six centuries ago! The gasoline engine was discovered 120 years ago by our prodigious scientists! Even the creation of the hat you wear on your head was ours! It was our country’s idea to attach strings on your shoes! All forms of art and the development of knives was ours! Even the idea of boiling water! It would take a long time if I tell you each and every single detail, but our liberal country imparted these discoveries to its neighbors without asking for anything in return. With all of this, you can say that we are at the peak of evolution in this planet! Even if the whole world bows to us a hundred times and cried, it wouldn't be enough to thank us!"

And the people continued their boastful speech in such a manner.

"Do you have proof?" Hermes asked.

"Of course!" They answered without hesitation. As if it was a matter of fact, common sense, and absolute truth.

"Everything we said are recorded in the *'Great World History Encyclopedia'* and the *'Great Book of Inventions and Discoveries'*! The things written here are unquestionable proof! Anyone who reads this, no matter how foolish, will have to believe!"

And the things they took the pain to bring before the travelers were two massive and gorgeously decorated encyclopedias.

Then Kino asked, "If that's the case, then where did these *'Great World History Encyclopedia'* and *'Great Book of Inventions and Discoveries'* came from?"

The residents answered with confidence no less than before,

"Of course, it's from our country! —Isn't it obvious?!"

"A Country For Offer" —Sales Talk—[edit]

Further into Kino, Master, Hermes, and luggage-carrier's travels, they met Shizu in the middle of the meadows. He was with Riku. And they rode a buggy.

And in the buggy was the white-haired girl Ti, whose usual silence made her thoughts undiscernable.

"Oh, if it isn't Kino and Hermes."

Shizu greeted, and Kino gave a quick bow and greeted back, "It's been a while, Riku and your owner.”

That dealt quite a blow to Shizu. His body shook violently. “It’s Shizu! Shizu! Shizu! Shizu! Shizu!”

Kino ignored the sweater-wearing guy and introduced Master and luggage-carrier to Riku. Hermes showered Riku with insults, which Riku returned to Hermes.

“You sure get along well,” Master remarked.

“Sigh…,” Shizu exhaled. For some reason, he seemed extremely tired.

“What’s wrong? You look pale,” Kino asked.

Shizu answered, “The truth is for a while now, my shoulders and head feel so heavy. I can’t seem to find a cure for it. It bothers me even during driving, it’s quite painful.”

“Maybe it’s because you were swinging your sword around too much?”

“I thought so too, so I held back in my training for a while, but the pain just wouldn’t go away.”

Shizu said, and brooded over. Riku also looked like he has given up on finding the cause, while Ti, “…”

Only stood quietly beside them.

“That’s simple!” Luggage-carrier said as he got off the yellow car.

“Sweater-wearing mister, do you know a girl who wore braids and was dressed in purple clothes?”

“Huh?” Shizu fell into thought, and then, “A long time ago, I met a girl with that description, but…”

“And was this girl, by any chance, dead?” Luggage-carrier looked like he was having fun, while Shizu looked puzzled.

“It’s just as you say, but…how did you know?”

“Why, it’s because I can see.”

“See what?” Kino asked, and luggage-carrier answered with brimming selfconfidence.

“Sweater-wearing mister, right now that girl’s spirit is sitting on your right shoulder with a smile on her face. It looks like she liked you very much and decided to atta—”

‘Attach herself to you.’ Before luggage-carrier could finish off his sentence, Master has beaten him to a pulp. A right punch, a left straight, and a left kick sent him beneath her heels, and finally she attacked him by using a chair’s capability as a dangerous weapon.

“Ow— Ack— Ugh— Guh—” He shrieked. Ah, this is brutal.

“I’ll be taking my leave,” Master tossed the now limp luggage-carrier to the car, said her farewells, and disappeared like a bullet. The yellow car left in an unbelievable speed and was soon out of their sight.

And so Shizu’s troupe, Kino and Hermes left that place.

“That’s great, isn’t it? Now you know the cause,” Kino said.

“I don’t believe in such things as ghosts.” Shizu was not in a merry mood. “Well, shall we go to the next country?” He said, then started the buggy’s engine. Kino launched Hermes and followed after the buggy.

The walls of the next country soon came into view.

“I wonder what kind of country it will be this time?” Kino mused.

Shizu replied, “I wonder. I only hope that it’s a country that is loved by its citizens, a country that they take pride in. I am sure such a country would be a good one. I would be happy if we find such a country.”

And soon upon entry, Kino, Hermes, the tired Shizu and his company were surrounded by the residents.

“We are this country’s politicians! We were chosen by the citizens thru an election!”

All of a sudden, the men and women asked Kino and Shizu a question, “By the way, won’t you start a war with our country?”

Before you say ‘Oh my god!’, let’s have an explanation.

“If you travelers were sent by the army of some foreign country to declare war, we will immediately surrender.”

“Why?” “Why is that?”

Shizu and Kino asked.

“Why of course! It was decided by our constitution that this country shall never go to war! Wars are evil because they kill people. It’s just not right. That’s why our country had an idea. We’ll get rid of wars for eternity; as such our country doesn’t have an army. Isn’t it wonderful? It is right?”

“Then?” “And so?”

“That’s what we’re telling you! If you declare war on this country, we’ll surrender immediately, and this country will be under the occupation of travelers. In short, this country will be yours!”

Kino spoke. “I see— I understand that, but I don’t need this country. I’m fine as long as I could stay for a bit.”

The smile on the residents’ face did not fade.

“I see, I see. But we have a proposal. If you occupy this country today, we’ll handle all the troublesome government work. You can pose as the governors of this country and relax. You can have a permanent residence here or go traveling again! During your absence, we will serve as the representatives of you, the governors! You don’t have to worry about anything! What do you think? Eh?”

Shizu only kept silent with his tired face, while Riku asked,

“What are we going to do, Master Shizu? —With this, we can also live in this country.”

Shizu glanced at the people who were waiting for his reply with excited faces.

“Maybe we should leave,” was his only reply.

“Ah, wait—”

He ignored the people chasing after him and rode the buggy while stroking his right shoulder. He started the engine and rode away in no time.

Kino asked Hermes what they should do next, and as there was nothing interesting in the country, they decided to leave.

Upon leaving the country, Shizu's buggy stopped in the middle of the meadow. It seems that they were thinking where to go next.

"Kino, what should I do from here on?" Shizu asked with a miserable face, "How should I know, moron! You get to choose your own path! That is what it means to be human! That is what it means to live! Stop looking down! Don't you have a perfect pair of legs?! Go use them! No matter how painful the road waiting for you, no matter if there's a strong headwind blowing against you! Fight it! With your own will! With your soul! — is what Kino has in mind," Hermes answered. Kino hit Hermes tank, "Ow!"

"I don't know. Because I am not a God."

"I guess so. It can't be helped… Maybe I'll go look somewhere again…"

Shizu sighed once more. Then when he looked to his left, Ti was there, "…"

Looking quietly at Shizu's right shoulder. She was staring at it.

"There's nothing to see. Don't mind it so much," Shizu said, but Ti still kept on looking. Her green eyes only stared, and stared.

"…"

Then, without any voice coming out, her lips moved. She became expressionless for a while, then repeated it. It was as if she was talking with someone.

"What's the matter?" Shizu asked in wonder.

"It spoke," Ti answered.

"Something? No, someone?"

Ti stared straight at the befuddled Shizu and answered his question.

"'I will always love Mr. Shizu,' said the girl on your shoulder."

Kino, Shizu, Riku, and Hermes…

"…"

Fell silent just like Ti.

After a while, Shizu said this.

"Well…, I guess it's all right even if the pain doesn't go away."

"A Country of Cities" —Don't Stop Us!—[edit]

Kino and Hermes parted ways with Shizu and proceeded through the path in the meadow.

Soon, they found a place scattered with corpses. They were the bones of humans eaten by wild animals.

"I wonder what's up? Some national bureau?"

"… Natural burial?"

"Yeah that!" Hermes said and fell silent.

"So harsh," Kino said.

The corpses increased in numb er as they continued. Soon, when they thought they couldn't see anymore corpses, the country's walls came into view.

It was a vast country. The entry process was completely automatic. When they entered, they saw the interior full of tight rows of buildings, with hovees (Note: A 'hover vehicle'. A vehicle that floats.) flying around, and billboards floating in the air. There were also railroads running on top of elevated bridges.

One would realize upon seeing the number of people traversing the roads that it was a country with a high population and population density.

Kino planned to make her stay as discreet as possible, but because her appearance was not as tidy as the country's people, she was met with a barrage of questions like, "How are things outside the country?" or, "How's life as a traveler?"

Three days passed by in a blink, and soon it was time for them to leave. As there was an inspector at the emigration gates, Kino decided to ask about the corpses.

“Oh, those are people from this country.”

“So it was natural burial after all?” Hermes asked.

“No, that’s not it.” The inspector answered. “They are— travelers.”

“Huh?” “What do you mean?”

“As you can see, this country has quite an advanced technology. That’s why there are many people who yearn to travel, to live outside the walls. These people wanted a change from their city life, longed for the outdoors, and go on traveling.”

“But they died quite near the country,” Kino said.

“Well that’s that. The people from this country were brought up in a civilized environment. Outdoor living won’t be easy for us. You may not believe me, but there are people who set out without even knowing how to make a fire. Some of them don’t even know how to tell apart north, east, west and south—not that I know myself. I couldn’t even hold tools necessary for traveling. Moreover, we don’t know what things we would need in the first place. With that, what do you think would happen to someone, who has nothing but longing , when he goes out of the country?”

“He’d die, I guess,” Hermes said.

“Isn’t it? That’s why everyone dies. As soon as the country could no longer be seen, they wouldn’t know how to go back.”

“Then why don’t they ban people from traveling?” Kino asked.

“That’s possible, but if we do that, the population won’t get diminished. When you ride a train, don’t you wish more people get off in other stations before yours? It will free some seats.”

Was the inspector’s answer.

Kino and Hermes were running through a meadow.

"Well, where shall we go next, Hermes?"

"'Well, where shall we go next, Kino?' is what I'd like to say, but we can't go on anymore."

"Why?" Kino asked, and Hermes told her to look behind.

"Behind?"

When Kino looked back,

"Whoa!"

There were various things. A country moving at a fierce speed, trampling on another country; a tank firing its cannon; a young man painting; Nimya's plane doing somersaults in the air; Master coercing a trader; Shizu practicing with his sword; Riku complaining as Ti tugged on his fur; Inid setting up an ambush; A long line in front of a shop selling hydrogen bombs; a tall tower collapsing, and so on.

"What the? This is absurd, this can't be happening, Hermes!"

"That's okay Kino. After all, this is a dream."

"Huh? What did you just say, Hermes?"

"I said this is a dream. It's about time you wake up."

"What?"

"It's about time for you to wake up. About time… time… time… time…"

* * *

And the girl woke up with tears in her eyes.

"Huh…? Where am I…?" The girl muttered. It was a usual morning in her usual room.

"Ah. It's a dream."

The girl leapt out of her bed and marked her calendar. Then she went down to the dining room. Her parents greeted her with a smile. Breakfast was ready.

"I had a weird dream." The girl said. 'Oh?' said her father. 'Dear me,' said her mother.

“It was a weird dream—fun, scary, pleasant, painful, sad, happy, and mysterious all at the same time. But…”

“But?” “But?”

“I can no longer remember any of it.”

“I see.” “I see.”

The girl asked, “Say, mother, father… have you had a ‘dream’ like that before?”

The mother shook her head with a smile, and the father answered with a gentle tone, “You see, adults don’t dream.”

And the girl will be having her twelfth birthday the next month.

Translator’s Notes[edit]

1. ↑ This is a bonus story that can be unlocked in the PS2 Visual Novel. It makes numerous references to stories in volumes 1 to 8.
2. ↑ I think this is when Kino was choosing between the pronouns ‘boku’ and ‘watashi’ to refer to herself.

Author's Notes

"Afterword" —Preface—[edit]

Volume 13 Release!

"Special Afterword Project" Let's Ask Sigsawa Keiichi!

Editorial Department: Why a Q&A?

Sigsawa: Are we starting? I sometimes get questions from my fan letters, and there were also some during a talk I gave at a library a while back that I wasn't able to answer, and I don't have a blog to write these on. I did some of this for "Gakuen Kino 2", for the same reasons, but I felt like I should do it again for the main series, "Kino no Tabi". It's special!

Editor: "Special", huh? Have you ever written a normal afterword?

Sigsawa: That's that, this is this. No connection. Noresore.[1]

Editor: "Noresore"?

Sigsawa: It's an eel, of the Congridae family. Well more accurately, it's a larva (Leptocephalus), if you want to be really exact. Sometimes you can eat them at rotating sushi shops inside of gunkanmaki. It has a slippery texture, and it's slightly sweet. It's delicious.

Editor: ...So what's the connection between "noresore" and "the afterword"?

Sigsawa: There isn't really any!

Editor: ...Okay then, can I start asking actual questions now?

Sigsawa: Bring it!

Editor: What's your name? And is it your real name or a pen name?

Sigsawa: Sigsawa Keiichi. It's a pen name, of course. To any Japanese people with the name "時雨沢", pronounced Shiguresawa/zawa, I apologize. I'm not part of your bloodline.

Editor: You weren't very popular in class, huh?

Sigsawa: "Weren't very"?! Please don't ask questions and assume the negative from the start. Also, how is this the second question? Please don't ask these questions as if you already know the answers.

But I guess it's true, I wasn't very popular...

Editor: What's the origin of your pen name?

Sigsawa: Sigsawa comes from the firearm maker, Sigsauer. Keiichi is a certain manga character's name with different kanji. I didn't have much time when I was writing my first manuscript, so I kind of just chose it off the cuff, but now I like it. By the way, it doesn't look anything like my real name. Not even one character. I wanted to become a different person.

Editor: So what's your real name?

Sigsawa: Edward Nitori Van Buren III

Editor: Sure you're okay with that? From now on, we'll call you "Ed".

Sigsawa: Sorry. My real name is a secret. From now on, I'll answer seriously as usual.

Editor: "As usual"?

Sigsawa: Correction. I'll do it politely and sometimes seriously. Also, the time of writing is 2009. Please note this is subject to change.

Editor: Date of birth? Blood type? Gender?

Sigsawa: I was born in 1972, the month and day are a secret. A+. I'm supposed to be a male.

Editor: Are you married?

Sigsawa: I have never been married, and I have no arrangements or plans for it in the future. However, I kind of want to try divorce.

Editor: Why?

Sigsawa: I heard that after getting divorced, men become free!

Editor: Are you an idiot?

Sigsawa: Please keep it a secret from everyone else.

Editor: What's your body data?

Sigsawa: My body is 177 centimeters tall. In elementary school, I was short, but then around middle school, I grew 10cm in a single year. Because of that, my uniform never fit, and I always felt like I looked awkward. Recently, my weight has been 75kg, give or take. I'm scared of health complications, so I want to drop to around 70kg. By the way, I was 95kg at my heaviest; I got fat due to my American lifestyle. My eyesight is bad. Without glasses on, I can't even tell who the person next to me is. I do have disposable contacts, but putting them in and taking them out is so troublesome, so I don't use them. I prefer glasses, which I can doze off wearing.

Editor: Any health problems?

Sigsawa: I'm fairly healthy, so I don't go to the doctor very often. Maybe once a year, when I get a cold. Well at the start of the year, I did have some liver sashimi that left me screaming in pain...

If you mean serious issues, I have tendonitis in both hands from typing every day, so that hurts. I regularly get massages. I have no back pain, thanks to my excellent RECARO chair. However, ever since I had a herniated intervertebral disk over 10 years ago, I have to be careful in the winters and when I carry luggage.

Editor: Are you worse with the heat or the cold?

Sigsawa: Definitely hot weather! When it gets too hot, my brain melts and I can't think at all. I love air conditioning so much that it usually makes everyone else complain, "it's too cold!" In cold weather, you can just wear more clothes and still be comfortable. I will say though that I'd rather not experience -40 degree weather again, like I did in America. At that point, it's basically "violence"; just walking from the dorms to the cafeteria made me feel like my life was in danger.

Editor: Anything about your body that bothers you?

Sigsawa: Other than my weight, my ears. Because of my nervous personality, my ears are extraordinarily good, and I hear all sorts of noises and voices. When I stay in a hotel, the refrigerator and air conditioner keep me from sleeping. When I go to karaoke or concerts, my ears and head hurt. I don't want to, but I hear all the people whispering around me. It's a huge problem, even from far away.

Editor: What food do you love? Hate?

Sigsawa: My favorite food is nigiri sushi, by far! I'm so glad I was born in Japan. Fluke fin, white trevally, alfonsino, pickled mackerel, and fatty tuna are some of the kinds I like most. I also enjoy sashimi. Besides that, it's pretty normal, but I like curry rice and ramen. For set meals at restaurants, I like fried chicken, chicken soba, and fried ginger pork. As a kid, I loved instant ramen, but I guess my tastes have changed, and I don't really eat it these days.

As for food I hate, I don't think I would say "I will never put that in my mouth" to anything that's regularly eaten in Japan. I won't go out of my way to buy and eat natto though, and even though I like the taste of grilled or boiled fish, I'm bad at taking out the bones, so I'll pass.

Editor: What drinks do you love? Hate?

Sigsawa: Usually, I drink mineral water. When I'm eating, I mainly have oolong tea. I also like carbonated drinks like Dr. Pepper and root beer, because in Japan, they're treated as weird.

I hate coffee because I can't handle it. I cannot drink it black at all. Even if you give me nice coffee, I will pour sugar and milk into it. Also, I have a bit of a "cat's tongue", so I need to cool hot drinks down before I drink them.

I used to love milk. In middle school, I would chug 1-liter packs in one go, but now it makes my stomach rumble, and I hate that I can't drink it anymore.

Editor: Do you drink alcohol?

Sigsawa: For the last few years, aside from the sake used in shinto ceremonies (omiki), I haven't drunk a single drop. In my student days, I did drink a bit, but I've never able to hold it well, so I never came to enjoy it. I probably won't drink in the future, either. By the way, I have never once in my lifetime experienced a hangover.

Editor: Do you smoke cigarettes?

Sigsawa: I have never smoked in my life. I don't have any reason to start, so I don't think I'll smoke in the future either. My head hurts quite a bit when I'm in a small room with someone that smokes, so I think it's probably impossible for me to even live together with a smoker.

Editor: What are your hobbies?

Sigsawa: Anime, manga, motorcycle touring, driving, cameras, photography, guns, anything military-related, scuba diving, traveling, karaoke, *etc. etc.* Too many, even for myself. And whenever I get the chance, I find myself adding more.

Editor: Of those, which have you been interested in for the longest?

Sigsawa: Probably anime? Around my second year of middle school is when I really started to watch anime and learn about new series and creators. Without that, the current me wouldn't exist.

Editor: Do you watch TV? What shows do you like?

Sigsawa: Honestly, I don't watch much these days. My current office doesn't have a TV in it. The shows I watch most would definitely be anime. I try to research what's what and watch as much as I can, but it's impossible to cover everything. Still, I look forward to the start of every new season.

Editor: Do you read?

Sigsawa: I do, but not very much. For the last couple years, I've been reading even less. And I don't think that's a good thing.

Editor: What have you read that's left a strong, lasting impression? Please name five. Not including your own work.

Sigsawa: "Samurai!" (by Saburo Sakai) - The Mitsubishi Zero pilot Saburo's air combat records. I read it in my elementary school library, and at the time, it was the book I was most impressed with. Humans must never give up until the very end.

"The Adventures of John Manjiro" (author unknown) - A story about the man who drifted to America in the late Edo period. I remember being late to elementary school because I started reading it in the morning and lost track of time. 10 years after that, I went to America too.

"Record of Lodoss War" (by Mizuno Ryo) - A popular series, everyone knows it. They were my favorite books in high school, and after that is when I started to pay more attention to light novels (although we didn't call them that back then).

"Boogiepop Never Laughs" (by Kadono Kouhei) - This is also a popular series, and it made me aware of the Dengeki Bunko label. Without Boogiepop, I might never have sent anything to Dengeki Bunko.

"Textbooks" - All the textbooks I've read up to now are included in this. When I was a kid, I believed "What is written in textbooks doesn't contain a single error." That's taught me a few things.

Editor: How about in the past year?

Sigsawa: "Sniper on the Eastern Front" (by Albrecht Wacker, translated by Nakamura Yasuyuki) - The record of a German sniper on the Eastern Front, during World War II. It’s a spectacular book that doesn't just cover the battles, but also the torture and killing of prisoners. It feels like every gruesome thing you can imagine is there, including a number of photos of corpses on the battlefield. It is a good source for depicting what the battlefield was like, so I recommend it to anyone that's interested, but I promise it will make you feel sick.

Editor: What films have left a deep impression on you? List 5.

Sigsawa: "Roman Holiday" - It's a worldwide masterpiece. Especially the painful silence of the last scene. I use it as a reference for trying to create a story that's beautiful even though it didn't have a happy ending where the two of them got together. It was the inspiration for Gakuen Kino 3.

"Laputa: Castle in the Sky" - Of Director Miyazaki Hayao's works, this is my personal favorite. When I going through puberty, I was seriously infatuated with the heroine, Sheeta. I learned about it through newspaper ads right before release, and I was moved when I saw it on the theater big screen. Ever since then, I've been buying anime magazines to stay up-to-date with new information. It was a big turning point in making me into an anime otaku.

"Die Hard" - A widely acclaimed movie with a perfect screenplay. You cannot find a better film for studying how to present your characters, or how to build and release tension. For any aspiring writers that haven't seen this film, you might think I'm screwing with you, but you should definitely watch it.

"Amadeus" - The tale of Salieri, the hard worker, and Mozart, the genius. It's a film that makes you consider what talent is, and whether it can make you happy. The long director's cut came out in 2002, and I was quite impressed by it. If you haven't seen it, please do.

"Patlabor: The Movie" - This is another film with splendid foreshadowing and screenwriting that I use as a model for when writing action plots. In college, I watched it so much that I could recite all of the lines from memory. I'm really glad I was able to come across this movie.

Editor: How about in the last year?

Sigsawa: "The Dark Knight" - The second installment of the newest Batman series. I'm not very familiar with American comics, and I haven't watched much of Batman in the past, but this film's screenplay, direction, and cinematography were all incredible.

Editor: What games have left a lasting impression on you? List five.

Sigsawa: "Life" - The board game. Even though you're just playing a casual game, it makes kids understand the severity of life. Also, I thought you could sell your kids in the game.

"Concentration" - The card game. This is the game I was best at as a kid. I was often praised for having a good memory, and I remember being awakened to the pleasure of remembering things.

"Gradius" - A shooting game. In middle school, I used to play the MSX version every day. Thanks to that, my eyesight got worse really quickly, and I've been living the glasses life every since. Still, it was really fun. This game taught me "even though it's hard, if I keep trying, I can clear it." Well, I'm still not very good at it, though.

"Ys II" - As you all know, this is a monster title that's still being remade and sold today. I didn't have a PC at the time, so in high school, I used to go over to my friend's house to play. I developed a crush on the heroine Lilia when she turned around in the OP. Actually, that was the inspiration for the Lillia in "Lillia and Treize". I had been thinking of using that name at some point for the last 10 years or so.

"Act Combat" - I first played it on the PS1, and since then I've been chasing the series as much as possible. I bought a PS2 specifically to play this game. It's fun to play even after clearing it, just flying around in Free Flight mode, without anything shooting at you.

Editor: Anything in the last year?

Sigsawa: I haven't been able to finish any games in the last year... Sob.

Editor: What TV anime series have left a strong impression on you? List five.

Sigsawa: "Mobile Suit Gundam" - The very first Gundam. When I was in elementary school, there wasn't a single boy that hadn't seen it. Also, I've also built some gunpla, even though I'm bad at it. I love the Z'Gok.

"Galaxy Express 999" - When I didn't have any money to buy manga, I got interested in TV anime. Travel, guns, unique world views, *etc.* "Kino no Tabi"'s greatest influence was undoubtedly this.

"Lupin the Third (Second series)" - The second series gets a lot of rebroadcasts, so I was always watching it. The scripts were bright and always so full of variety, so I could enjoy it every day.

"Metal Armor Dragonar" - When I finally got a VCR, I remember that this was the first anime that I recorded in full. I was mesmerized by the realism of the mechs taking off from the aircraft carrier in the OP. This series is the reason I love robots with airplane wings.

"Neon Genesis Evangelion" - I watched it while I was studying in America, and I had the videos sent over from Japan. I'm not going to say that I like everything about Eva, but it's still a memorable masterpiece.

Also, these aren't TV anime, but please let me include "Genmu Senki Leda" and "Windaria", as the classics of early OVAs. I love them so much, and I've rewatched them countless times.

Editor: How about in the last year?

Sigsawa: "Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion R2" - That's within a year of when I'm writing this. To be honest, I learned a lot from the screenwriting, foreshadowing, direction, *etc.* The beauty of the finale, with its climactic ending, was brilliant.

Editor: What manga have left a considerable impression on you? Name five.

Sigsawa: "Doraemon" (by Fujiko F. Fujio) - When I was in elementary school, I loved to imagine my own gadgets. I also had delusions of what I would do if I was put into the world of Doraemon. It's been thirty years since then, and now I can talk to my nephew about Doraemon, which makes me feel youthful. By the way, my favorite episode is "The Reality Pillow".

"T-P Bon" (by Fujiko F. Fujio) - This is another from Fujiko F. Fujio-san, a time patrol story. When I was in elementary school, I loved its hard worldview, where people died quite easily. This is another series where I liked to imagine what I would do in their situation. I was quite happy to see that the complete version recently came out.

"Possible/Impossible Secrets" (by Uchiyama Yasuji) - Of all the series in Gakken Manga Himitsu series, this is the best, and the one that I read the most. Several years ago, I repurchased it, and it's still on my bookshelf today. I want to ride a linear motor car soon.

"Aoi-chan Panic!" (by Takemoto Izumi) - Due to my older sister's influence, I read a lot of shoujo manga. This was the first shoujo series that I bought for myself, and I remember being so furiously embarrassed when I went to the bookstore that I wanted to die. It's a bright and fun sci-fi comedy, and I'd like to rewrite it at some point (by that I mean creating something new with the same motifs). I still fiercely hope they adapt it into a TV anime someday.

"Oz" (by Itsuki Natsumi) - Near-future science fiction. I remember when I read it in college, I so was moved by the drawn-out tension and the incredible final scene that I was determined to "novelize it myself, and study writing!" Then, after just a few lines, I became incredibly frustrated. I am also hoping for a TV anime adaptation of Oz (although I did enjoy the OVA).

Editor: And in the past year?

Sigsawa: "The Summit of the Gods" (by Taniguchi Jiro) - A mountainous drama based on the novel by Yumemakura Baku-san. Takahashi Yashichiro, who wrote Shakugan no Shana, recommended it to me, and it was really interesting. I found the camera that appears in the manga at a local camera shop, and ended up buying it. It's over 80 years old, but it still takes pictures just fine. The film and development costs are expensive though.

Editor: So it seems you like motorcyles. What have you ridden in the past, and what do you ride now?

Sigsawa: The bikes I've ridden in the past, which is to say that I've let go of, are the Yamaha DT50 and the Honda XLR250R.

The DT was a low-power offroad model. It was my first, and I got it when I was 20 years old. With it, I learned a lot about what you need to own and ride a motorcycle. I fell a lot, but since it was slow, I was never injured.

The XLR was the one I got next; another offroad bike, but this time with 250cc. I traveled more than 10,000km on this in a single year. I loaded it up with luggage and traveled all over the place, from Hokkaido to Kyoto. This was, without a doubt, the motorcycle that made me who I am today.

Right now, I own several, but the one I usually ride is a model that's very rare in Japan (it's not very expensive, it's just not popular). if I wrote its name here, I'd be found out, so it's a secret.

Recently, I got my hands on the lovely Super Cub 90, and I take it on short rides, like to go shopping or to go to the bank. It's quite convenient, since now I don't need a car. Someday, I'd also like to take it out on a tour.

Editor: Have you experienced any danger, riding your motorcycle before?

Sigsawa: I've been riding for 17 years now, and I haven't gotten a single traffic violation or been in any accidents. I haven't even fallen, except on forest trails or offroading.

That said, I have been in some dangerous situations. Twice now, I've understeered on a corner and gone flying. Once, I was almost sent flying by a light truck that popped out of a side street. I've slipped on a snow-covered road once (don't hurry when it's snowing out...). I dozed off on the highway once. Also, there was one time when I rode into the opposite lane.

Lastly, you know how they say "the brain increases its processing speed to avoid crisis, and your surroundings seem to move in slow motion"? I have experienced that in real life. In a sense, it was a valuable experience, but I never want that to happen again. I will continue to keep safe driving in mind from now on.

Editor: Going back to the topic of writing, what do you need in order to write?

Sigsawa: Some method of taking notes (more on that later), a computer, word processing software, a Japanese input method editor, dictionary/thesaurus software, a wrist brace to prevent tendonitis, and finally, an internet connection for collecting materials and email. I wish I could say that as long as I have those, I can write anywhere, but my own room is where I can settle down the best. Many of my fellow authors usually write in family restaurants or cafes, but I can't do it. When I started writing the first book of "Meg and Seron", I tried locking myself up in a hotel for about a week. Since the hotel was so expensive, and the results were about the same, it felt like a waste, and I haven't done it again since.

Editor: Where did you live when you debuted? Where do you live now?

Sigsawa: Just before I debuted, I was kicked out of my parents' house, so for two years after that, I was living in a small apartment for 35,000￥/month. It used to be a student dorm, so everything I needed, like air conditioning and a fridge, were already there, which was really convenient. The only part I didn't like was how small the bathroom was.

After that, I lived in a much more spacious apartment for two years. It was in the suburbs, so the rent was cheap, but since the property was family-oriented, and I was a single guy that didn't go outside much, they must have thought I was creepy.

I also lived in a family-oriented terrace house for four years. It was comfortable, but I couldn't fit all of the stuff that kept piling up, so it became way too messy, and so last year, I finally moved into a house.

Houses are so easy. I can store tons of books, leave my motorcycles in the yard, and friends can stay over, I love it. Its nickname: "The Kino Palace".

Editor: When in the day do you write?

Sigsawa: I've said it elsewhere, but usually I wake up around noon, and then I start. I make most of my progress late at night. If a deadline's getting close, though, I can't be that leisurely, and the entire time I'm awake, it's work work work.

Editor: What do you always keep in mind when you write?

Sigsawa: The most important thing is to make your deadlines. If you don't, the book can't be released.

Aside from that, remember to keep notes and not to use words or phrases that are too complicated. Notes are really important, because no matter what wonderful ideas you think up, it's all meaningless if you forget them.

Editor: How do you take notes?

Sigsawa: If I'm in front of my computer, I use that. I have a file for ideas I've come up with, and it's gotten pretty big.

If I'm driving, I have a voice recorder that I use. Otherwise, I'll send an email to myself on my phone. Since it's waterproof, it's also usable in the bath. If you don't have a waterproof phone, I recommend using a notebook meant for diving, since you can write with it underwater.

By the way, I pretty much only write by hand for autographs and sending packages. My writing is quite messy. I almost can't read it myself.

Editor: Do any of your characters' names have specific origins?

Sigsawa: Some do, some don't. I'll focus on main characters and characters that I haven't talked about yet.

"Kino" - It means "movie/theater" in German. In German class, I heard it and liked the sound of it. It was originally the name for a male character, as previously shown.

"Hermes" - From the mythological Greek god. I preferred the sound of

"Erumesu" over "Herumesu". [2]

"Riku" - From the name of an acquaintance's dog. Same for his breed and appearance.

"Rafa" - From the name of a town in the Palestine/Gaza area. I saw it on the news, and used it just for how it sounded. There's no particular political meaning behind it.

"Tifana (Ti)" - The name of a town in Mexico. To contrast with Rafa.

"Allison Whittington" - Taken from the name of a friend's daughter. On a side note, she also has a little sister, named "Anika", who's a bit annoyed that I didn't use her name. I'll use it someday.

"Wilhelm 'Wil' Schultz" - It's just kind of feels German. The abbreviation should technically be "Willy", but I came up with "Wil" first, and that was that. Schultz came from the name of the creator of "Peanuts" (the one with Snoopy).

"Benedict" - It just sort of happened. (Sorry fans, for the second time).

"Fiona (Fi)" - The name sounds beautiful. On a side note, Fi and Ti share the same voice actress, Noto Mamiko!

"Lilliane (Lillia)" - As I mentioned before, it came from the character in "Ys II". This was another name that I was going to use for a male character... I chose "Lilliane" so that I could make Lillia an abbreviation. Then I googled it and found out that it was a real name.

"Treize" - It originates from the character Treze in the same series, and I thought he seemed like a good fit (sorry fans, for the third time). "Treize" also seems to mean "thirteen" in French, but there's no relevance to that.

"Axentine" - Actually, this is the name I initially thought of for Lillia when I was writing "Allison III". Having a heroine named "Axe" came off too strong, so it turned into a side character's name, but I kept it as a girl's name.

"Megmica (Meg)" - I wanted to use "Meg" because it sounds nice. I came up with "Megmica" so that "Meg" would be the abbreviation.

"Seron" - It comes from "The Spear of Seron", which is the symbol of the eastern faction in the series. Actually, in the original plot, the ending had Seron throwing spear-like objects at the enemy to save Meg.

By the way, no one mentions it when he introduces himself because in their world, it's a popular name. If you're wondering what the origin of the word "Seron" is, it's the Japanese word for "public opinion" [3].

Editor: What surprised you the most when you debuted as an author?

Sigsawa: In the results from the "Kino no Tabi" questionnaire, the percentage of female readers was considerably higher than the rest of the Dengeki Bunko series. I hadn't written the series especially for women, so it was a really nice surprise.

Editor: Do you get along well with other authors?

Sigsawa: We hang out quite often. Most of my college friends live in rural areas, so right now I only have my fellow writers to hang out with. We usually just go eat or sing karaoke, meet up at events, and go sightseeing once in a while. Things like that. Dengeki Bunko has a lot of authors, but I've been introduced to writers from other labels too. Also, I've talked to anime directors, producers, voice actors, singers, and mangaka.

Editor: Where do you go?

Sigsawa: When we're not traveling, then Tokyo, usually in the area around the stations in Shinjuku or Ikebukuro. Once in a while, they'll come visit my home in Kanagawa. I wrote this in the afterword of "Meg & Seron IV" too, but I have a curtain with the signatures of everyone that comes by. Right now the count is at 17.

Editor: When you're together, what do you talk about?

Sigsawa: In most cases, it's otaku talk, or things we enjoy like cars or diving. Sometimes we'll actually have serious discussions about the industry or about writing. Everyone has different values, and there's no right or wrong to it. It's really inspiring for me when I talk to people that are a different age or come from a different background.

Editor: For the last three years, you've been part of the selection committee for the "Dengeki Novel Prize". Do you have anything to say about that?

Sigsawa: When they first asked me to do it, I was really worried whether I was really fit for the position, but as the saying goes, "it's easier to give birth than it is to worry about it", and the work is more fun than I expected.

The selection process makes me think a lot about the passion, effort, and talent of the applicants left in the final selection. Sometimes I end up feeling like "whichever new author we choose, won't they someday overtake me? Isn't this just enabling the person who will bury my career in the dust?"

Still, for the sake of the next generation of Dengeki Bunko, I want to choose the very best people. The number of entries has increased again this year ('09), which is really quite incredible. By the time this book is published, this year's selection will probably be over already.

Incidentally, I have a little bit of insider info to share.

When the works are sent to the selection committee members, we don't know anything at all about the applicants' backgrounds. The only thing we know is the author's penname; things like their age, background, and sex are unknown. Once the committee comes to an agreement, then we do get to learn those things, but the evaluation is untouched by any sort of profiling. Everything is about how interesting the work is.

Editor: Do you have any message for future applicants?

Sigsawa: I respect your courage for challenging a competition with such a small chance of success, from the bottom of my heart. There's a joke among Dengeki Bunko authors that comes up in conversation a lot - "If we entered the Dengeki Novel Competition today, we probably couldn't win (or debut as authors), huh?"

Also, do your best every year not to miss the deadline for the contest. If you become a pro, the number of deadlines will only increase.

All I have left to say is, "I'll be waiting."

Editor: This is a bit impolite to ask, but can you tell us honestly what your annual income is? At your lowest and at your highest.

Sigsawa: Many authors do think it's a bad idea to discuss income or number of sales... but I'm pretty open about it with other writers and my close friends. I can't write any specific figures here, but I will answer in hopes that it encourages anyone thinking about becoming an author.

My lowest annual income was, naturally, the year I made my debut. I debuted in Bunko in July, so my total income for that year was much lower than a salaryman at my age. However, it was enough to sustain my lifestyle of writing in my apartment from dawn to dusk. Even the fact that I ate bargain spaghetti every day is now a fond memory (by the way, before my debut, I was borrowing money from my mother, and after, I paid it all back).

The year after that, my income increased like a double-or-nothing bet.

The highest point was when "Kino no Tabi" was made into an anime, and I had my largest number of reprints. It was enough that in a single year, it completely cancelled out the fact that I hadn't worked at all until my debut. Looking at the numbers on the ledger, and especially knowing how much had already been paid in taxes, no one was more surprised than me. I haven't reached that point again since then, but it's been stable.

Editor: Didn't you hate having to pay that much in taxes?

Sigsawa: I hired a tax consultant and we went over "tax reduction" methods. I pay my taxes properly, since live in the country called Japan, and paying taxes is mandatory, but also in order to fully exercise my rights. Also, I wouldn't be able to live without this country's "public servants".

Editor: What do you think of the fact that you earn a lot?

Sigsawa: First of all, I am so grateful to everyone that buys my books.

It's thanks to you that I can live without having to work another job, and I can focus on writing.

I can also buy reference materials (unless it's something very expensive), and it's definitely easier to have the real thing in front of you.

I don't think being poor means "unhappiness". However, it's certainly "inconvenient".

Because I'm in such a blessed siutation, I won't slack off, and I want to write the next book. Bringing new stories quickly to all of the fans waiting for me is what I should do, and what I want to do.

Editor: So if you accrue enough wealth, will you stop writing?

Sigsawa: Unless there's a very good reason, like if I fall ill, I won't stop.

Even if I won 10 billion yen in an overseas lottery (which is illegal in Japan anyway), I would probably still write novels. Writing is a job, yes, but it's also a very fun hobby.

Editor: What would you do if you had 10 billion yen?

Sigsawa: First, I'd go on a trip to outer space! Then, I'd make a life-size Zaku, and put it next to the life-size Gundam statue!

Then, I'd throw my money at the developers of those robots you can ride and move in! A gundam's way too big, so something like an 8m tall Patlabor.

Editor: What extravagances do you treat yourself to?

Sigsawa: At the nearby mall, I eat at the rotating sushi shop without paying attention to the color of the plates, I buy reference books without looking at the price, and I use the expensive soft toilet paper!

Editor: Okay, and where do you cut costs?

Sigsawa: I drink a bottle of mineral water (2L) every day, and I buy them from the supermarket when they're on sale. I save 100 yen on every bottle, and it makes me really happy.

Editor: What is the hardest part of your daily life?

Sigsawa: Since I usually sleep from midnight to the middle of the day, the timing for taking out the recyclable garbage twice a month never works out. The biodegradable waste is collected separately for each house, so I can just throw it in the bucket and leave it out, but the recycling is impossible.

As a result, the kitchen is lined with empty plastic bottles. As if I'm planning to build a raft. The living room has a mountain of cardboard boxes. As if I'm planning to build a robot.

Editor: Right now, what do you want most?

Sigsawa: It's not just right now, but for my whole life, I've wanted "good health, in body and mind".

I've never had any serious illness, and I hope that continues to be the case. With that at least, I believe that even if life has its obstacles, I can survive and carry on.

Editor: What is a phrase you love?

Sigsawa: "Good things come to those who wait." - That is, after you've done as much as you can, it's up to luck. I don't think it means that you should just wait around without ever doing anything.

I think it's the same as "Do your best, and let the heavens do the rest."

Editor: What is a phrase you hate?

Sigsawa: "I'm from UNICEF." - I used to laugh it, actually, but recently I haven't been laughing, and I've come to hate it. [4]

Editor: What are your goals for the future?

Sigsawa: As of right now, I've been an author for nine years, so my first goal is to do it for ten years. Then, I want to do it for 20 years. Finally, for 30 years.

There are many stories that I still want to write.

Editor: Aside from work, what do you want to try most right now?

Sigsawa: The other day, when I helped a fellow writer move, I stayed in a room there, and thought "I'd like to try living in Tokyo for once." I've lived in fairly convenient suburbs and in the empty countryside, but I've never lived in a big city, with every kind of store right there in the neighborhood. Looking around at all the tourist attractions, museums, and historic landmarks seems like it would be very stimulating, so it would be nice for two years at most, and I'm trying to calculate whether I can handle living in a city apartment building.

Editor: What do you want to try doing before your life is over?

Sigsawa: I wrote it before too, but definitely "space travel"! I want to see what it's like to look down at Earth from outer space. I wonder whether it will be possible within the next 30 years.

Editor: It's about time to wrap things up, but do you have anything left to say to all the readers that read this to the end?

Sigsawa: I truly feel happy knowing that you read this book. From now on too, I'll do my best to constantly put out books!

Thank you so much for picking up this book! Let's meet again in the next book!

October 10, 2009 Sigsawa Keiichi

Translator's Notes[edit]

1. ↑ In Japanese, this is wordplay. "sore wa sore. kore wa kore. noresore." Noresore is a colloquial word that doesn't have an English equivalent, and Sigsawa explains what it is immediately after, so no point describing it here. Feel free to jump in with an edit if you think of a better way to handle this.
2. ↑ Technically, the H is silent in Japanese.

3. ↑ "Public opinion", "世論", is pronounced "yoron", but the first kanji can also be pronounced "se".
4. ↑ My understanding is as follows: UNICEF Japan pushed for stricter regulation of child pornography in Japan, so this phrase became a bit of a meme (along the lines of Chris Hansen's "take a seat"). When talks of legislation became more concrete, and it threatened to cover "obscenity" in manga/anime/LN/VN as well, the phrase probably became more agitating than humorous for fans and creators alike.